

From soldiers to scholars, with SMU's help

SMU Warriors Scholarship helps retiring SAF personnel transit into a second career with a suitable course of study

By Cai Yong

caiyong@sph.com.sg

TO recognise the contribution that servicemen make to the nation, Singapore Management University (SMU) is awarding up to 20 postgraduate scholarships a year to retiring Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) personnel.

As the SAF believes in keeping its people fresh, retirement age is as young as 50 for commissioned officers. With many productive years still ahead of them, retiring personnel often go on to start a new career in the public or private sector.

The SMU Warriors Scholarship was thus established in January to further help SAF personnel transit into their second career. The university is putting up S\$1 million per year for the scholarship. SMU has awarded 14 scholarships so far this year – nine this month and five in January.

Yong Wui Chiang was among the nine and is now pursuing an Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) at SMU. "I am learning a lot more (about) things outside the military. The business world and the military world are quite different," said the former colonel.

SMU offers 18 programmes to Warriors Scholarship holders, including Master of Business Administration and Master of Science in Quantitative Finance.

Mr Yong's EMBA was not initially covered, but SMU made special arrangements to partially sponsor it, on the grounds that his military background would bring new perspective to the class.

His programme started in May, just as school was winding down for the mid-year break for his two daughters, aged 15 and 16. So, in a reversal of roles, it was he who had to spend his weekends hitting the books at home while his daughters got to go out.

The former army commander, though, sees it as a chance to lead by example, and show his daughters the right attitude. And it has certainly brought him closer to his daughters. He related an incident at home when his project group was there to work on an assignment. "(My daughters) saw us discussing and arguing a little bit here and there, and they asked: 'Papa, does everyone in your project group do a fair share of work?'"

Talking about problems that the girls routinely face in school has brought them closer together. "It was quite a good bonding time," said Mr Yong.

Interacting with private sector leaders has given him interesting insight. Obvious differences aside, there were also surprising similarities between an army and a firm. For one, issues of sustainability have become increasingly important. With 80 per cent of the army being operationally ready NSmen, the army places strong emphasis on building a committed reserve force, willing to take time out for in-camp training.

"Today in the business world, like I've learnt . . . it's also not just about getting the profit now, but how to do it in a sustainable way that is good for society, good for customers," Mr Yong said, citing the larger role of corporate social responsibility as example.

When he learnt of the customer-cen-



MR YONG

'This is a great opportunity, and I'm very grateful to SMU for providing it.'

PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

tric model that many companies now adopt, he also found parallels with the military's concept of a combined arms operation. Organising various business functions around a customer is not unlike organising various combat arms to strike at a common target. "Of course, the customer is not the enemy, but the one you have to win over," he added.

Military strategies also translate well in the private sector. Mr Yong, for instance, found himself considering business strategies in terms of first defending key advantages, before going on the offensive with expansion plans.

"There are these similarities, and when I share my military experience, there is a connection," he said.

Asked about some of the defining moments of his career, Mr Yong fondly recalled his experience during the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) outbreak, as part of an SAF task force that supported the Ministry of Health. "That is when I started to work with civilians and other ministries, and realised that Singaporeans in general do rise to the occasion," he said. "When times are tough, Singaporeans do step forward and go the extra mile to fulfil their duties."

For the first time in 30 years, Mr Yong will be spending National Day as a civilian. It is perhaps fitting that he is closing this chapter of his life by going back to school. After all, he started his military career with a scholarship from the SAF.

Having devoted more than half his life to serving the nation, though, Mr Yong feels ready to see how the other half lives: "It's a new journey. As with all new journeys, it is exciting.

"This is a great opportunity, and I'm very grateful to SMU for providing it."