

They are *lao jiao* (Hokkien slang for veteran) Operationally Ready National Servicemen (NSmen) who have served the nation with distinction for the past decades. But they are also concerned about who would defend Singapore after them. Naturally, as fathers, they hope their children can take over the baton.

Senior Lieutenant Colonel (SLTC) (NS) Bervyn Lee hopes his 13-year-old son with Down Syndrome can serve NS in the future in some capacity. Such is his belief in NS as a rite of passage for all Singaporeans and that everyone has a part to play in defending one's own.



SLTC (NS) Lee with his son Matthew. He believes that NS should start from instilling the right values in children.

Likewise, LTC (NS) (Ret) Gerald Singham, who was the Commanding Officer of an NS combat engineer battalion, is heartened that his eldest son, a Commando medic, has found his NS training "tough but purposeful".

Today, they engage not just their children, but all Singaporean sons. As CSNS steering committee members, they have been entrusted with the task of finding ways to strengthen NS for future generations. The experience has been an absorbing one for the duo, who have known each other since their days in Anglo-Chinese School.

Believing in NS

At the CSNS focus group discussions where they hosted Singaporeans from all walks of life, they heard numerous constructive ideas on strengthening NS. These included expanding the volunteers' scheme, reducing administrative workloads and strengthening public recognition.

But what stood out for them was the existence of two distinct camps: One group believes in NS, while the other group serves because NS is mandatory.

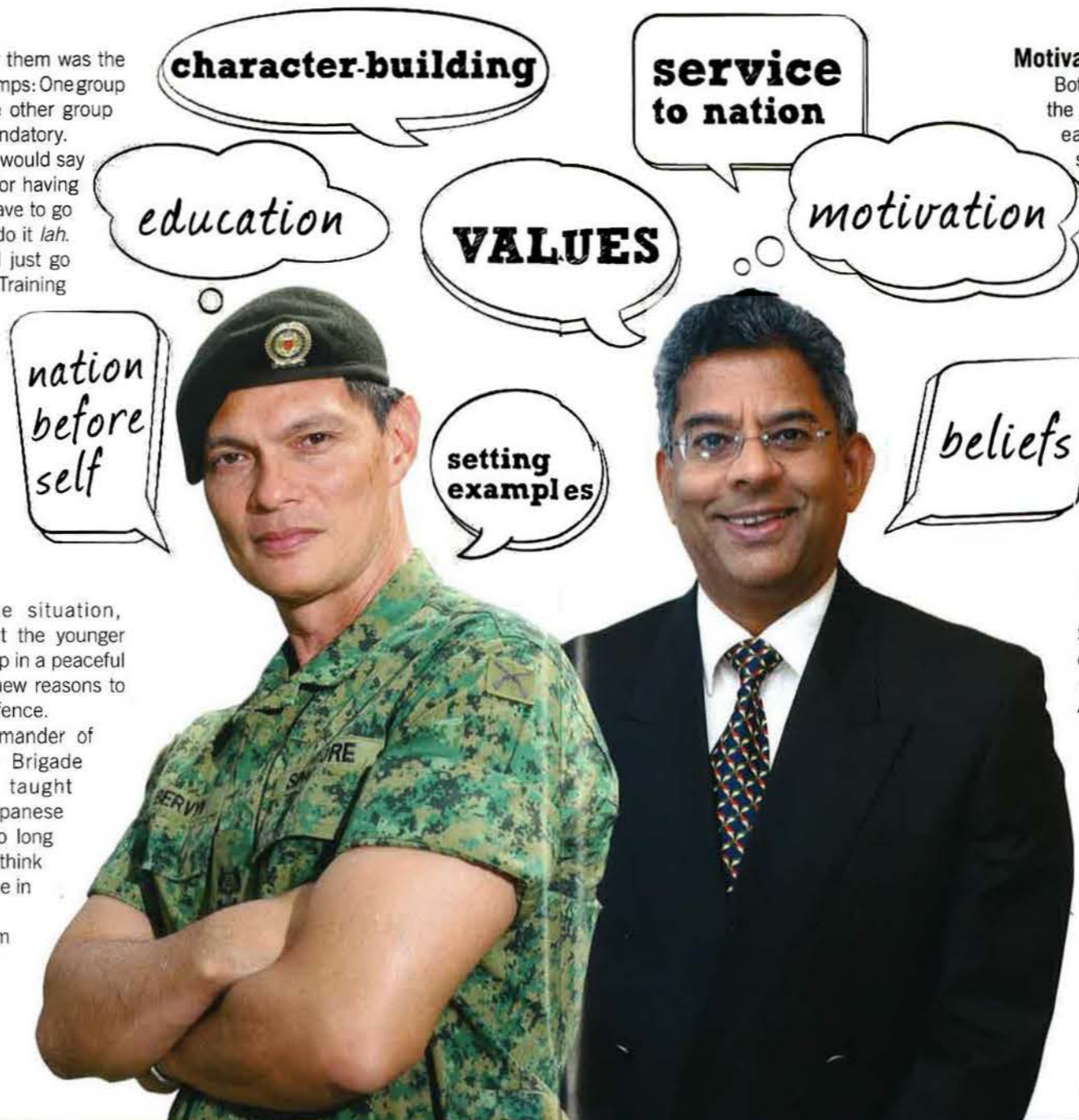
"This group of NSmen would say '*bo pian*' (Hokkien slang for having no choice), NS is NS, I have to go in for two years so I just do it *lah*. When SAF 100 comes, I just go in, wait for the In-Camp Training (ICT) to be over, and then I go back to the civilian street," said LTC (NS) (Ret) Singham.

"They still did their best in training, it's just that their motivation was not high," added the 52-year-old corporate lawyer and partner at Rodyk & Davidson law firm.

Commenting on the situation, SLTC (NS) Lee said that the younger generations have grown up in a peaceful era, and are in need of new reasons to serve beyond national defence.

The 49-year-old commander of 9th Singapore Infantry Brigade explained: "We were taught in school about the Japanese Occupation but that's too long ago for anyone to even think of as a possible occurrence in Singapore."

LTC (NS) (Ret) Singham added: "I am a *lao jiao* soldier. My reason for serving NS may be different. The younger generation needs to find their own meaning."



Motivating the troops

Both men believe that instilling the correct values in the children early can go a long way in strengthening NS.

SLTC (NS) Lee recalled being perturbed by a comment made by an NSman during a focus group discussion: "You have taken away two years of my life, how are you going to compensate me?"

But NS is about service to your countrymen so it is important not to let self-centred behaviour take root in our children, explained the Director of Student Life at Singapore Management University (SMU).

He is the man behind SMU LifeLessons, a character-building programme which aims to mould students to be their best – for others. "Even within SMU we are perpetuating the idea that your education means absolutely nothing if you don't make the world a better place first. Whatever you do, remember it is not just about yourselves."

He added: "NS needs to start from the way we talk to our children, and the way we educate them."

Similarly, LTC (NS) (Ret) Singham suggested that parents should set a good



LTC (NS) (Ret) Singham is proud that his son Timothy has found his NS experience meaningful.

example for their children. "Children can see how their parents react to something and they'll begin to internalise it as part of their own values."

He and his wife never grumbled in front of their children about how he had to be away from home for ICT. They also shared positive aspects of NS and "the great things that daddy is doing in camp".

"Nothing moves your heart and your passion (in serving the nation) as much as family support," he added.

Staying relevant

SLTC (NS) Lee believes that NS remains relevant because "it is such a powerful force when it comes to bringing people together". He sees NS as necessary not only for defence, but also for forging a national identity.

LTC (NS) (Ret) Singham, too, is convinced. To him, the active and frank CSNS discussions show that Singaporeans do care about NS.

"Very often, when Singaporeans go for these feedback sessions, nobody wants to say anything. But here (at CSNS discussions), they were vocal and were actually thinking, reflecting, and making suggestions," he said.

"The fact that they were giving NS a lot of thought was very moving for me," he added. **PNR**

Instil values to strengthen NS

Committee to Strengthen National Service (CSNS) with PIONEER their thoughts on how to better

members Bervyn Lee and Gerald Singham share motivate servicemen to do their best for NS.