



Why we should remember

An interview with Ng Chee Meng when he was Education Minister (Schools).



Mr Ng was a regular in the Singapore Armed Forces before he joined the government in 2015. In the SAF, he rose to become Chief of Air Force and then Chief of Defence Force.

[Photo: MINDEF]

What's Up: Unlike our previous Education Ministers, you were born after independence—long after World War 2. Are there stories your own parents or grandparents have shared with you about the Battle for Singapore and the Japanese Occupation that have especially moved or touched you?

Mr Ng: I remember my mum talking about the hardships of war. My grandfather went into hiding during Operation Sook Ching (a term that means “purge through cleansing”). During this time, Chinese men between the ages of 18 and 50 were called to screening centres and many were executed. I never met my grandfather, but I heard about his experience through my mother.

My mother also talked about the hardships of day to day life at that time. Most meals were made up of tapioca. Eating an egg was a luxury. Most importantly, she was very sad and lamented that she missed the opportunity of getting an education. She had to support her family and started working at a young age as a seamstress.

These stories left a deep impression on me. It was an impact for life. They made me realise the importance of Total Defence to keep Singapore safe. I heard these stories from my mother, and now it is our turn to share these stories in today's context with our children, so they, too, understand the importance of keeping Singapore safe.

Singapore is safe today, but we cannot take peace for granted. We have peace in Singapore today, but that is because we put a lot of effort into making that happen.

What's Up: You once led the Singapore Armed Forces as Chief of Defence Force. Do you think Singapore is better able to defend itself now than in 1942?

Mr Ng: Absolutely. Firstly, we have better weapons. Most importantly, Singaporeans have the will to keep Singapore safe.

In 1942, we were not the most important piece in the British Empire's war strategy. "Fortress" Singapore was given second-rate weapons to defend itself. But, when we became a nation-state, we made a promise to stand up for ourselves. We decided to get better weapons and also train our sons, young Singaporeans, to protect ourselves. That is what has made the difference. This is worth celebrating. We stand up for ourselves. This year, we will have had 50 years of National Service.

It is terrible when one can't defend oneself and everything that matters to you. A war puts everything we love in danger – brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, friends. You may have heard or read about what is happening to the children in Syria, what Iraq is going through. We are happy that our neighbourhood is relatively peaceful. But, we should never take peace for granted. We should always be prepared for the worst – war – but always remember that our main aim is to keep peace.

What's Up: As a former air force pilot, you must treat military defence very seriously. But, your own children are daughters, who won't be called up for National Service. What do you tell them and other girls about their role in defending Singapore?

Mr Ng: There are many ways of contributing to a stronger Singapore. Gender does not make a difference. There are five aspects to Total Defence. You can play a part in making sure that Singaporeans of all races get along and are kind and understanding of one another; you can contribute to the country's economy to make sure that all of us are doing well together; you can be a resilient person who is able to take the right action for the country's good... there are many ways in which everyone can contribute to Singapore.

In fact, I believe that a stronghold of society are our mothers. They strengthen the family, build relationships in communities, nurture the young – these are all components of Total Defence.

Defence is not the domain of the men, but all of us.

Our daughters will stand up for Singapore, and some have also chosen the military path.



Education Minister Ng Chee Meng with students from Princess Elizabeth Primary on the first day of school this year.

[Photo: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION]

What's Up: Singapore looks completely different from what it must have been like in 1942, so it is hard to imagine the setting for the Battle for Singapore. But, is there any historic site in today's Singapore that you think is very evocative?

Mr Ng: The Former Ford Factory in Bukit Timah is one of them. This is where the British forces surrendered to the Japanese after the Battle of Singapore. But, if I had to choose, I would choose Sentosa.

Sentosa was a military base during the Second World War, but the guns were facing south because the British expected the Japanese to come from that direction. The Japanese came from the north. It's a good place in which to understand what went wrong with the British strategy against the Japanese.

Sentosa was also a prisoner of war camp. During Operation Sook Ching, which I mentioned earlier, Chinese men suspected of being anti-Japanese were killed on the beach. There are many poignant lessons to be learnt here. To me, it is a reminder of how important it is for Singaporeans to be at the top of our game, and take Total Defence seriously, not just at war times, but in times of peace to ensure war does not dawn upon Singapore.

VOCAB BUILDER

evocative (say "i-vok-uh-tiv"; adjective) = having the power to make people feel something.

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