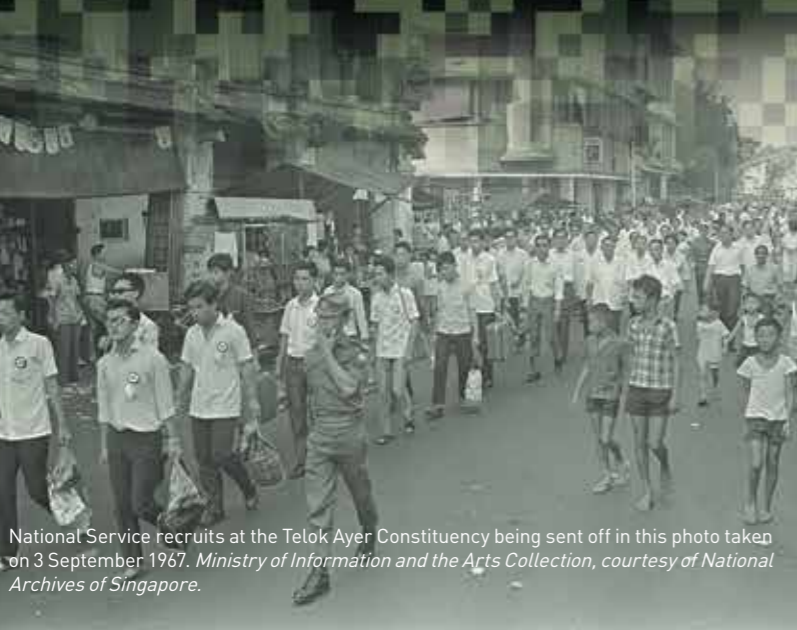


50 YEARS OF NATIONAL SERVICE

National Service is a rite of passage for Singaporean men when they come of age. **Sharen Chua** shares highlights of books on National Service in the Legal Deposit Collection.



National Service recruits at the Telok Ayer Constituency being sent off in this photo taken on 3 September 1967. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

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Singapore celebrates 50 years of National Service in 2017. The compulsory enlistment of soldiers was introduced in 1967 with the passing of the National Service (Amendment) Act on 17 March that year.¹ This was not the first time the government had tried to implement a mandatory conscript service. In May 1954, the British attempted to introduce National Service but the move was met with violent protests by Chinese middle school students – later known as the National Service Riots of 1954 – who refused to support the colonial government.²

The Need for National Service

When Singapore separated from Malaysia on 9 August 1965, the island-state saw the need to beef up its security with a conscript service. This would supplement the skeletal military forces comprising 1 SIR and 2 SIR (1st and 2nd Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment) and the PDF (People's Defence Force). The withdrawal of the British army in the late 1960s would only underscore the need for Singapore to have a military that could be reckoned with.

As founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described it: "We thought it important for people in and outside Singapore to know that despite our small population, we could mobilise a large fighting force at short notice."³

As Singapore was not large or wealthy enough to support an effective full-time military force, the option was to have a regular corps supplemented by a conscript reserve.⁴ However, both Lee and then Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee were aware that conscription would not be well received by the public. They believed that education was the key to changing the people's mindset. Among other things, the National Police Cadet Corps and National Cadet Corps were established in secondary schools as a co-curricular activity, helping to prepare teenage boys for National Service and inculcate a sense of patriotism. By 1972, some 90 percent of secondary schools were participating in the cadet corps.⁵

The government's strategy to convince the public of the importance of having a strong national defence worked. Although anti-National Service protests broke out on 17 March 1967 on the back of the government announcement three days earlier, these were not as serious as the riots that took place in 1954.⁶

On 17 August 1967, the first batch of 9,000 male youths born between 1 January and 30 June 1949 were enlisted for National Service.⁷

The pioneer batch of 900 men were conscripted into the Army's 3rd and 4th SIR for two-year full-time National Service, while the rest served

part-time in the PDF, Special Constabulary and Vigilante Corps.⁸ ♦

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LEGAL DEPOSIT COLLECTION

Over the years, the National Library has collected – via Legal Deposit – various published materials relating to National Service in Singapore. These include orientation handbooks for recruits, parents' handbooks, code of conduct guidebooks, commemorative publications as well as personal accounts by former recruits of their National Service experience. Here are some highlights from the collection:

National Service and You (1967) [Call no.: RCLOS 355.2236095957 SIN]

Published in the four official languages, these booklets answered basic questions such as what National Service is, how to register, how to request for a deferment, penalties for failing to report and how to apply for an exit permit.

The Army and You: Orientation Handbook (1967); **The Singapore Vigilante Corps: Orientation Handbook** (1967); **The Singapore Special Constabulary: Orientation Handbook** (1967) [Call nos.: RCLOS 355.225 SIN; RCLOS 355.232 SIN; RCLOS 351.742 SIN]

These were orientation handbooks written to help recruits understand what National Service was all about.

Code of Conduct for the Singapore Armed Forces (1967) [Call no.: RCLOS 355.13 SIN]

This booklet clearly lists out the rules that recruits had to abide by at all times, such as not talking or boasting about their vocation, not drinking alcohol excessively and the importance of safeguarding confidential information.

My Son – The NS Man: What Parents Should Know About NS (1990) [Call no.: RSING 355.2236095957 MY]

This handbook provides parents with a better understanding of the National Service experience and the roles that their sons would play

in contributing to the defence and security of Singapore.

Michael Chiang's Hit Play, Army Daze: From Real Blur to Real Men (1996) [Call no.: RSING 355.1095957 CHI]

This comic book is based on the well-known play of the same title by Michael Chiang. It tells of the coming of age of six boys from diverse backgrounds as they experience army life together.

Shoulder to Shoulder: Our National Service Journal: Commemorating 35 years of National Service (2002) [Call no.: RSING 355.223095957 KOH]

In the Foreword to this commemorative book, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong wrote that "our National Servicemen have provided the bedrock of peace and stability upon which we have built our economy and society".

40 Years & 40 Stories of National Service (2007) [Call no.: RSING 355.223095957 FOR]

Published in 2007 to commemorate 40 years of National Service, this anthology features the stories and personal experiences of 39 men whose stints in National Service spanned the four decades. The reader is encouraged to pen his own experience as the 40th story.

Ah Boys to Men (2013) [Call no.: RSING 741.595957 NEO]

Adapted from Jack Neo's popular 2012 film, *Ah Boys to Men*, this coming-of-age comic book of the same title chronicles the experiences of a group of boys undergoing Basic Military Training.

With Pride We Lead : 21 Strategies to Lead, Excel and Overcome as an NSF (2015) [Legal Deposit Collection]

Author Victor Lim (using the moniker Vic Van Dam) shares his personal account of the National Service experience, including tips on how to excel as a soldier.

WHAT IS THE LEGAL DEPOSIT?

One of the statutory functions of the National Library Board Act is Legal Deposit. Under the act, all publishers, commercial or otherwise, are required by law to deposit two copies of every work published in Singapore with the National Library within four weeks of its publication. The Legal Deposit function ensures that Singapore's published heritage is preserved for future generations. Legal Deposit also acts as a repository for published materials, providing exposure via the online catalogue, PublicationSG: catalogue.nlb.gov.sg/publicationsg. For more information, please visit www.nlb.gov.sg/Deposit.

Notes

- 1 Republic of Singapore. *Government gazette. Acts supplement* (1967, March 17). The National Service (Amendment) Act 1975 (Act 2 of 1967, p. 109). Singapore: [s.n.]. [Call no.: RCLOS 348.5957 SGGAS-[HWE]]
- 2 Liu, H., & Wong, S. K. (2004). *Singapore Chinese society in transition: Business, politics & socio-economic change, 1945–1965* (pp. 142–146). New York: Peter Lang. [Call no.: RSING 959.5704 LIU-[HIS]]; Clutterbuck, R. L. (1984). *Conflict and violence in Singapore and Malaysia 1945–1983* (pp. 82–84). Singapore: G. Brash. [Call no.: RSING 959.57 CLU-[HIS]]
- 3 Lee, Kuan Yew. (2015). *From third world to first: The Singapore story, 1965–2000: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (p. 33). Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions; Straits Times Press. [Call no. 959.5705092 LEE-[HIS]]
- 4 *National service and you* (p. 5). (1967). Singapore: Printed by the Govt. Print. Off. [Call no.: RCLOS 355.2236095957 SIN]
- 5 Lee, 2015, p. 33; Singapore. Parliament. *Parliamentary debates: Official report* (1972, November 22). Considered in Committee, Reported and Third Reading of the National Cadet Corps Bill (Vol. 32, col 376). Singapore: Govt. Printer. [Call no.: RSING 328.5957 SIN]
- 6 Chiang, M. (1997). *SAF and 30 years of National Service* (pp. 18–19). Singapore: Armour Publishing for MINDEF Public Affairs. [Call no.: RSING 355.22 CHI]; *40 years & 40 stories of National Service* (p. 29). (2007). Singapore: Landmark Books. [Call no.: RSING 355.223095957 FOR]
- 7 All set for call-up of first batch. (1967, March 14). *The Straits Times*, p. 20. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.
- 8 *40 years & 40 stories of National Service*, 2007, p. 29.