

Hentak¹
By Elliot Goodman

A parade square on a dark Singaporean night.

The parade square is surrounded by three buildings. There are street lights illuminating the whole square with white light. Three contingents of cadets, 60 each, are formed up in neat rows of three. The contingents form a horseshoe shape with their platoon commander in the middle. They all wear army fatigues with folded sleeves. The platoon commander wears a red beret.

The cadets stand straight with their hands by their sides. There are other instructors walking around behind the contingents.

The platoon commander walks around the inside of the horseshoe glaring at the cadets. His rank displays two solid black bars, a lieutenant.

This Year: 2019

PLATOON COMMANDER: [*Shouting.*] CADETS!

CADETS: [*In unison.*] Yes Sir!

PC: [*Continues shouting*] Do you know what you did wrong?

CADETS: No Sir!

PC: [*Furiously.*] Why Not?

He turns around and slowly takes a few steps away from the cadets. He pauses to think.

[*Yelling out command.*] HENTAK KAKI CEPAT HENTAK!

The cadets start marching on the spot, arms by their sides, knees raising to 90 degrees, steps in sync.

In 2019, as a male Singaporean citizen, I enlisted in the army to serve my two years of mandatory national service. It was simple enough: Spend two months in basic military training (BMT), get posted somewhere else, spend the next twenty months doing that.

But it wasn't that simple. Those two months in BMT weren't just your introduction to soldiering, they were also your chance to prove yourself. Your performance in these two months were what shaped the entirety of the next twenty.

¹ A Malay command for marching in place.

Everybody wanted different things out of their time in the army — there were a variety of different jobs you could do. My uncle told me stories about his job as a storeman. All he had to do was count the equipment in the storeroom and make sure it was all there. He even got to go home at the end of the day! All you had to do was get a doctor's note to prove you were unfit for combat. My other uncle told me tales of being a mechanic. He repaired tanks. "It's very easy! I never have to go outfield! I just wait for them to come back!" He says if you perform too well they'll give you a tough job in the infantry. My brother was a combat medic. He says it's not worth being in the infantry. Especially if you're not at the top. But being at the top is too tough. His friend, an officer, once had to spend two weeks in the jungle with only two days' worth of food. He recommended trying to become a military driver. I disagreed with them, and frankly, I was offended. How dare they offer me the easy way out. So, I decided to become an officer.

Cadets continue marching on the spot.

PC: [*Violently throws his arm out to point at a scared cadet in the front row of the left contingent.*] Cadet! You Know!

SCARED CADET: [*Avoiding eye contact.*] Yes Sir! I was laughing while marching to lunch, Sir!

PC: [*Approaches the scared cadet.*] And why were you laughing?

SCARED CADET: [*Glances at the cadet next to him.*] Because my friend was singing a song, Sir!

PC: That's right. So, because you like laughing so much, [*He looks around at all the cadets.*] we're all going to laugh together. Okay? [*He smiles at the scared cadet.*]

SCARED CADET: Yes Sir!

PC: [*Addressing the cadets.*] Come. Everyone. Laugh!

The cadets nervously start trying to laugh. They're too scared to laugh.

To become an officer I had to be amongst the top 2% of recruits. I trained hard to meet the physical requirements, and I took leadership opportunities where I could. Your peers' appraisals were just as important. A leader has to be well-liked.

It wasn't as simple as just sticking my hand up at every chance, I had to be careful with the effort I put in, I didn't want to come off as 'wayang' (that's a local term for try-hard). It was a careful game of balance between impressing my sergeants, while staying grounded with my

peers. There were several recruits that tipped the scales, pushing too hard to dazzle the commanders, forgetting about the pack. Once you were labelled as wayang, there was no going back — nobody likes a wayang dog.

My sergeants often asked me if I wanted to become an officer. I always said yes. It was part of their assessment of me; I couldn't become an officer if I wasn't interested. It was a little trickier when they asked: "Why?" Because to me it was obvious. Officers have the highest salary, and it's pretty cool when people have to call you 'Sir.' But of course, that wasn't the correct answer. The correct answer was that "I wanted to make my family proud." It was perfect. A brilliant response that was guaranteed to convince my sergeants of my strong motives.

Cadets continue laughing.

PC: [*Yelling.*] LOUDER!

The cadets do their best to be louder but the laughter is hollow.

[*Furious again.*] What? You need your friend to sing, is it?

The laughter grows slightly louder.

[*Pointing at the scared cadet once more.*] You! Sing!

SCARED CADET: [*Panicked.*] Yes Sir!

[*Singing a cadence song while the others continue laughing.*]

“Purple light,
in the valley,
this is where,
I wanna be.
Charlie Wing,
best companion.
With my rifle and my buddy and me....”

I sang a lot of songs during my time in BMT. In fact, I was known for it. I knew all kinds of songs: Purple Light, C130, Yellow Ribbon. I even made up a new one every now and then. I mostly sang for fun. All my fellow recruits echoed along with me, and I could get them to sing whatever I wanted. I also sang because that's what good soldiers do.

Every morning I would sing 'Cold Wind,' it was routine for every march before breakfast. The first time I sang it some of my platoon mates cried.

“... I know, I know,
 You have to go,
 So hurry back home,
 ‘Cus I miss you so.
 我要回家,
 我要回家,
 我要回家,²
 ‘Cus I miss you so.”

It’s a song about missing your mother, and for some, it was a little bit sad. But I never cried.

The same parade square on a different night. The cadets (in the same attire) are formed up in the same contingents, but this time they are all on the ground in a plank position. There is no laughter, the cadets are silent. The instructors prowl around watching them. The platoon commander is standing in the middle of the contingents.

PC: [*Pacing around as he speaks.*] Cadets! I hope you all are thinking about what happened today!

CADETS: Yes Sir!

PC: Anytime any one of you so much as whispers while I’m speaking, [*He pauses and looks around at the cadets, as if waiting for a sound.*] I will make you do this again and again. Understand?

CADETS: Yes Sir!

PC: Good. [*He pauses and looks around once more.*] Push-ups change!

The cadets quickly spring up from their elbows and forearms onto their palms. The gravel beneath them is sharp and they grimace.

One cadet inhales sharply through his teeth. He’s an 18 year old cadet, the youngest in the wing. His name tag reads ‘Goodman.’ Blood can be seen dripping from his elbows.

PC: [*Flicks his head around to face Goodman, who is in the front row of the contingent on the right.*]

² “Wo Yao Hui Jia,” Mandarin for “I want to go home.”

[*Menacingly.*] Ang Mo!³ Shut the fuck up!

These stories take place during my first two weeks in the Officer Cadet School. The “adjustment weeks” that are supposed to force us into the deep end and weed out the weaklings. That night I struggled to stifle my tears. My buddy could probably hear my breathing. Maybe he thought I was a weakling.

In a matter of days all of my drive had been depleted, my motivation exposed and abolished. The easy way out was becoming more appealing by the hour. And my brother was right, being an officer really was too tough. It didn’t seem worth it anymore. All of my friends had easy jobs. They went home every day, ate home cooked meals, and slept in a comfortable bed. I slept in the dirt.

I had no motivation to keep going, and I didn’t care about proving my family wrong anymore. So I searched for a way out.

A room on Tekong Island, the location of all Basic Training. The room is a bunk for a 16 man section. The walls are lined with bunk beds and lockers. There is a table in the center of the room surrounded by plastic chairs. The chairs are filled with recruits, all with a buzz cut, green singlet and black shorts. Some of the recruits are shirtless. They are having a conversation.

RECRUIT 1: My brother told me there’s a doctor you can pay to downpes.

RECRUIT 2: [*Doubtfully.*] Really? Where got this kind of doctor?

The other recruits murmur in agreement.

RECRUIT 1: Really! But must pay a lot!

RECRUIT 3: No lah! No need to pay! Just pee in your bed, then you can go home every night!

The recruits all laugh.

But I never did pay a doctor, or pee in my bed. Everyday I spoke to my platoon mate who had dropped out of the course with an injury. And everyday I fed my jealousy of his grand escape. Growing ever more tempted to follow in his footsteps. But I couldn’t follow through. Even after the military doctor told me the injury in my knees would get worse. And after

³ A Hokkien term literally meaning “red hair” commonly used to refer to white people.

countless nights of ten second showers, crammed in a stall with two other cadets. There was a part of me that didn't want to quit. I just had to figure out why.

So I thought about why I was doing it. Obviously, spite was out of the picture — it wasn't worth opening the lament configuration just to prove a couple of doubtful guys wrong. They probably would dismiss my accomplishments anyway. But what about the rest of my family? My parent's pride in knowing their son had done his best? My sister's admiration for her brave older brother? It was just like I told my sergeants during BMT, I want to make my family proud.

A two man bunk in the Officer Cadet School.

There are two beds against the walls on either side with a desk and chairs between them. Goodman is seen standing in the middle of the room, he's wearing a t-shirt and shorts. It's the end of the day.

Goodman is reading a message on his phone. It's a picture of his family playing cards.

With a straight face he throws his phone at the wall then sits down on his bed, staring at the ground.

But my phone calls went unanswered, and my texts left unread. My family was actually on vacation, celebrating Christmas five hours ahead of me. So when I finally got my two hours of free time at the end of the day, they were asleep. As you can imagine, this made it hard to convince myself that I was actually making them proud. At the height of my emotional distress, I believed they didn't care about me. My new motive that was supposed to push me through the next months of training had faded after just one night.

I was exhausted. Overwhelmed with training and punishment. Every morning I put on a uniform drenched in sweat from the day before. But worse than that, I was desperate. Abandoned by my own family, for whom I was supposedly doing all of this for. There was no motivation from despair.

So, I turned to my own desires. Opposing the selfless and altruistic values being drilled into me, I decided to be selfish. I began to consider the value of what I could accomplish for myself. Self-improvement: Confidence, leadership, independence. It feels stupid to me now, as I write a list of personal values. How could I possibly quantify such a complex experience? But this was the first step in my journey to become a leader.

A dark night in a Singaporean jungle.

The cadets are spaced out across the ground between the trees, they are sleeping. There is rain dripping through the leaves.

There is a loud crack followed by a thud in the distance.

PC: [*Sprinting through the trees with a flashlight in hand. He yells.*] What happened?

The cadets start to sit up, awoken by the commotion.

PC leaps over Goodman, who is too dazed to respond.

PC: [*Shouting.*] Is anyone hurt?

He disappears in the distance, running towards the sound.

I began to view my training less for what it was, and more for what I could get from it. I wasn't training to become an officer, to make money, or to prove myself to anyone. I was training for the value it could provide to my life in the future. I finally had the chance to conquer life-long battles that I'd always been struggling with. I decided that I would be working for myself, to make use of every opportunity I was given. There was a lot more to what I wanted than just bragging rights.

I finally managed to find a real motive, one that wasn't driven by spite or greed. But instead by personal desire, both to improve myself, and to be a good leader for others. It was exactly what I used to get myself through the next nine months of training, and the following eleven months of service after that. It's such a simple philosophy, to derive motivation from oneself, but it cost me far too much to figure it out. It'll be a real pain if I forget it.