

'Return to camp' visits and reconnecting with buddies: How to really celebrate 60 years of NS

Beyond next year's awards and parades, let's see the personal side, with camp visits for all, heritage trails, and a Day of Service reuniting unit mates.

Mike Hou

Whenever I think back on national service, one of the first places that comes to mind is my bunk in Pulau Tekong during basic military training. What I remember most is not any single exercise or parade, but the conversations we had in the bunk after training. The bunk itself was unremarkable. Yet, it became the setting for friendships, shared frustrations and the small moments of encouragement that helped us get through an unfamiliar and demanding experience.

For many national servicemen such as myself, memories of service are attached to particular places: a bunk, parade square, cookhouse, training area or guard post – or in my case as a former regular in the Republic of Singapore Navy, a ship's bridge. These places may appear insignificant to anyone else. But to the servicemen who spent formative years there, they contain stories of hardship, friendship, mistakes, achievement and personal growth.

Singapore celebrates 60 years of national service in 2027. To mark the occasion, the Ministry of Defence is considering enhancements to the NS Housing, Medical and Education Awards, as well as an NS60 recognition package for past and present national servicemen.

But a 60th anniversary also invites a larger question: How should Singapore commemorate an institution and rite of passage that has shaped generations of servicemen, their families and the wider community?

RECONNECT WITH NS BUDDIES FOR A NEW PURPOSE

Ask NSmen what they value most from their service and many will mention the friendships they formed.

These relationships are distinctive because they emerge not just from shared experiences, but also, for many, from operational environments where teamwork is not an abstract virtue.

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Servicemen train, solve problems, tolerate discomfort and take responsibility for one another. Yet, many gradually lose touch with one another. NS60 offers an opportunity to enable NSmen to remain connected with their unit mates after completing their training cycle, says the writer. PHOTO: ST FILE

operationally ready cycle ends, many units gradually lose touch.

Defence Minister Chan Chun Sing has spoken about exploring ways for NSmen to remain connected with their unit mates after completing their training cycle. NS60 offers an opportunity to put this into practice.

MINDEF could facilitate voluntary unit reunions, return visits and alumni networks. More ambitiously, Singapore could organise an NS60 Day of Service.

Former section, platoon or unit mates could register as teams to take part in community projects, including through the SG Defence Volunteer Network. Depending on the needs identified by community partners, they might distribute food, assist seniors, clean coastal areas, support people with disabilities or contribute their professional skills to charities.

The idea would not be to extend military obligations into civilian life. Participation should be entirely voluntary. Rather, it would give former units an opportunity to use their existing bonds and teamwork for a different form of national contribution. This would also broaden the public meaning of service. The qualities associated with NS – discipline, reliability, teamwork and responsibility for

others – need not end when a serviceman completes his final in-camp training.

A national day of service could involve spouses and children as well. Families would then be recognised not simply as people who accommodated the demands of NS, but also as partners in continuing its spirit of contribution.

REMEMBER THE PLACES OF SHARED HISTORY

A second response that NSmen might have when asked what they recall of NS is the importance of the places marking this vital journey for adolescent males. MINDEF could organise specialised "return to camp" visits for operationally ready and former NSmen during the NS60 year. Unlike a conventional open house showcasing current capabilities, these visits could allow NSmen to return to the camps in which they served and bring their families with them.

A father could show his children where he completed his basic training. A former commander could introduce his spouse to the people with whom he once served. Older NSmen could revisit camps or bases that have changed substantially since their time.

Such visits would allow families

to understand a part of their loved one's life that they may previously have known only through stories. They would also give NSmen something that a commemorative item cannot provide: an opportunity to share what their service meant.

Not every former camp can be reopened, of course. Operational and security requirements must remain paramount. Visits could begin with selected sites and units where access is feasible, with registration and appropriate security arrangements.

NS60 could also bring the history of NS into public spaces. Heritage trails could be created around historically significant locations, such as the former Central Manpower Base at Dempsey Hill. When Paya Lebar Air Base is eventually relocated, parts of its NS history could similarly be preserved.

Using a mobile phone, visitors could view archival images, listen to oral histories or see digital reconstructions of how a site looked in an earlier period. Former servicemen could contribute photographs and personal accounts, subject to security review, to build a digital archive of NS experiences across different generations, services and vocations.

The technology should not be

the main attraction. Its value would lie in turning the official history of NS into a living and personal one.

REDEFINE WHAT NS SHOULD STAND FOR

An anniversary should not only celebrate the past. It should also create space to ask what NS should represent for the future.

NS has never been experienced by servicemen alone. Parents support their sons through full-time NS. Spouses and children adjust their lives around in-camp training. Colleagues take on additional responsibilities when an NSman is called up. Women also contribute directly to Singapore's defence and security as regulars in the Singapore Armed Forces and Home Team, while many others serve the country through healthcare, education, social services, civil defence volunteering and community work.

These contributions are not identical to compulsory NS, and recognising them should not diminish the distinctive obligations borne by NSmen. But an institution as deeply embedded in Singapore society should be commemorated in a way that brings these different experiences into the conversation.

This is another reason why NS60 initiatives should involve families and communities. Return-to-camp visits could allow parents, spouses and children to understand what their loved ones experienced. Oral-history projects could record not only the memories of servicemen, but also those of family members who supported them through enlistment, deployments and repeated periods of operationally ready service.

An NS60 Day of Service could go further by inviting national servicemen and their families to contribute together. Former unit mates might organise a community project and invite their spouses and children to join them. This would connect military service with a broader culture of civic responsibility without suggesting that the different forms of contribution are interchangeable.

NS60 could also recognise the values that service should cultivate: responsibility, resilience, care for others, teamwork and the willingness to place collective needs alongside individual ones. These should not be presented as exclusively masculine qualities. They are qualities of citizenship, relevant to women and men alike.

THE NEXT 60 YEARS

For much of Singapore's early history, the primary task was to establish why NS was necessary. While the institution of NS has been deeply embedded in our national life, Singapore must continue to maintain a credible defence force while sustaining the trust and commitment of successive generations whose circumstances and expectations will change.

The social contract surrounding NS cannot be based only on an individual's duty to serve. It must also encompass the institution's duty to use his time responsibly, safeguard his well-being, recognise his contribution and remain responsive to the evolving needs of servicemen as well as society's expectations of national defence.

If NS60 enables servicemen to share their stories with their families, renew the friendships formed through service and apply their bonds to the needs of the community, it will do more than commemorate an anniversary.

It will remind Singaporeans that NS is not sustained by obligation alone but also by the ability of each generation to see itself as an active participant in a continuing national endeavour.

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