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NCOs' Role in Training Safety Through the Lens of the Singapore Army

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Sergeants Major Course

Singapore requires male citizens and permanent residents to begin two years of national service (NS) at age 18, as stipulated in the Enlistment Act (Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore, n.d.). Conscription separates enlistees from their families and loved ones, marking a drastic and uncomfortable transition from civilian to military lifestyle.

Enlistees undergo military training to contribute to national defense. However, it poses significant inherent safety risks, particularly for those with limited experience.

Singapore and U.S. Army NCOs share similar roles and responsibilities — to uphold standards and take care of their Soldiers. They follow approved training doctrines to ensure enlistee safety and achieve desired training outcomes.

Doctrine governs training and specifies the proper way to conduct drills and procedures. Ensuring enlistee safety throughout their service fosters positive public support of national defense. NCOs sometimes face ethical dilemmas in reporting peers and superiors

who breach training doctrines regarding the safety and welfare of their Soldiers. The ethical triangle helps NCOs untangle their doubts by shining a light on the path of the greater good. This article uses the examples of training deaths in the Singapore Army to emphasize the role of NCOs in training safety by reporting non-compliance with training doctrines promptly to minimize training fatalities and strengthen public confidence in the Army.



An armored infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) crushed and killed a Soldier during night training in Queensland, Australia. The Soldier served as an IFV commander. (Photo courtesy of the Singapore Army)

Training Deaths

In the past 15 years, the Singapore Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) recorded eight training deaths in the Singapore Army: four in 2012 and four between 2017 and 2019. Training deaths are fatalities resulting from military training. MINDEF convened a committee of inquiry (COI) to investigate the facts surrounding each of the eight training deaths to find the root causes, safety lapses, and systemic problems. The COI plays a vital role in promoting transparency and accountability to the public, especially the families and loved ones of the deceased Soldiers. This article analyzes three cases of training deaths in the Singapore Army.

Case Study #1

A jeep overturned and crushed an instructor for a Reconnaissance Commanders Course, while he sat in the rear seat during a convoy. The scout jeep pinned the Soldier until the medical team extricated and evacuated him to Khoo Teck Puat Hospital by ambulance. He underwent emergency surgery but did not survive his injuries. A forensic pathologist certified that hemorrhage from severe pelvic crush injuries caused the Soldier's death. The COI found that the conducting officer appointed a jeep operator without a valid license, and

that the deceased did not wear his helmet and seat belt before the accident. The COI concluded that safety breaches and personal negligence contributed to the death of this Soldier (Ministry of Defense, 2012).

Case Study #2

An armored infantry fighting vehicle (IFV) crushed and killed a Soldier during night training in Queensland, Australia. The Queensland authorities sent their

death investigation findings to MINDEF because the Soldier died during training on their premises. He served as an IFV commander. The report cited that the Soldier, with his upper body out of the vehicle turret, ordered his operator to reverse the IFV in pitch-black conditions. While reversing, the IFV dropped from a slope, ejecting the victim, and causing fatal injuries. MINDEF appointed a COI to investigate and confirm the findings of the Queensland authorities. The COI also discovered that the night vision device (NVD) on this IFV was not working, which increased the risk during night vehicle movement. Platoon mates told the COI that the deceased breached the training safety

regulation (TSR) because, in his eagerness to complete his mission undetected, he did not instruct his operator to turn on the IFV's headlights while traveling at night without an NVD (Ministry of Defense, 2018a).

Case Study #3

This Soldier took part in an eight-kilometer fast march and collapsed at the end point. A medical team gave first aid at once, and then an ambulance took him to Changi General Hospital. The doctors diagnosed the Soldier with heat stroke, which led to multiple organ failures. His condition worsened, and he passed away after 12 days of intensive care treatment in the hospital. The COI found that the platoon commander had subjected the Soldier and his platoon to an unauthorized collective punishment the night before the fast march. The commander's punishment kept the platoon from getting adequate rest, causing fatigue prior to the fast march. Furthermore, the COI found that the conducting officer rejected multiple calls to evacuate the physically distressed Soldier to a medical facility at the earliest opportunity (Ministry of Defense, 2018b).

These three case studies of training deaths in Singapore negatively affected the public's confidence in NS and their commitment to national defense.

Public Confidence in Global Armies

Singapore and South Korea rely on national service for the defense of their sovereignty, and public confidence is the bedrock of a successful military conscription system. Jensen & Montgomery (2024) postulated that the key to deterring potential aggressors, in prolonged warfare, is the ability to mobilize and expand military power quickly, proving the significance of demographic resilience in national defense. For volunteer armies such as the U.S. and Japan, public support is crucial to recruitment and maintaining the right number of Soldiers to defend their countries. These nations must provide incentives such as increased Soldier benefits in healthcare, home ownership, education, and veterans' programs to attract talent into the armies.

On the other hand, poor training and training deaths lead to dismal public opinion, which has adverse effects on recruitment and lowers the sustainability of combat power in volunteer armies. Beynon (2021) highlighted the issue of training deaths in the U.S. Army due to non-adherence to training doctrines. These training fatalities rattled Americans' confidence and support of the U.S. Army. According to Smith (2023), public confidence in the U.S. Army was at its lowest in 2023, causing a recruitment challenge that jeopardized its status as the most powerful military nation-state in the world. This case study showed that even for a military organization as strong as the U.S. Army, the lack of public confidence and support can pose a national security threat.

Singapore and South Korea share the same predicament of institutionalizing a national defense concept with conscription armies. Rane (2024) suggested that an aging population and decreasing birth rate — a phenomenon known as demographic decline — affect the military power of nations. South Korea's total birth rate was 0.72 in 2024, and this statistic highlights the manpower shortage issue in the Korean Army.

Each year, the Korean Army must enlist at least 200,000 Soldiers to maintain its military power. Failure to do so equates to a huge national security threat for South Korea. Although there are plans to mitigate this risk through mechanization and motorization of the Army, public confidence and support play a pivotal role in convincing the remaining pool of eligible citizens to join the military and minimize the national security threat.

Singapore's total birth rate dropped to a historic low of 0.97 in 2024 (Ng, 2025) and saw a rise in single-child families in 2025 (Tan, 2025). These statistics revealed that each woman in Singapore expects to have less than one baby in her lifetime, and the situation is not improving. If the baby is a male, he will enlist for NS once he reaches 18, as per the Enlistment Act. The Singapore Army needs to provide assurances of safety to the parents who send their sons for NS. Detrimental factors, such as training deaths, lower public confidence, and declining belief in the Singapore Army as a national institution, derail efforts on national defense (Boey, 2019).



Singapore and South Korea rely on national service for the defense of their sovereignty, and public confidence is the bedrock of a successful military conscription system. (DoD photo by D. Myles Cullen)

Blackbox Research conducted a public survey after the series of training deaths in 2019 to gauge Singaporeans' sentiments and public confidence in NS. Training fatalities caused a resounding 85% of Singaporeans to lose confidence in NS, even though 60% of them understood the inherent risks in military training involving the complex interface between men and machines (Romero, 2019). This creates an imperative for the Singapore Army to tactfully handle the potential public fallout in cases of training-related deaths.

Then-Defense Minister, Dr. Ng Eng Hen, stated that "any death is one too many" (Ministry of Defense, 2018a). The quote highlighted MINDEF's commitment to returning all Singaporean sons safely to their parents after NS. Then-Chief of Army, Major-General Goh Si Hou, said the Singapore Army could not behave as if training deaths were normal in the wake of a series of fatalities in 2019. The Singapore Army would reduce training tempo and intensity, review existing safety SOPs and training doctrines, and create a zero-accident mindset among its personnel to instill a better safety culture. MINDEF supported this safety initiative.

Likewise, in the U.S. Army, to ensure the safety and well-being of its Soldiers, leadership fosters a strong safety culture through open communication and active participation of all Soldiers, continuous improvement and review of safety systems, and instilling a mindset that safety is a mission outcome (Department of the Army, 2025a).

Then-Chief of Defense Force (CDF), Lieutenant-General Melvyn Ong, emphasized that the Singapore Army had to prioritize safety regardless of how long it might take (Boey, 2019). CDF announced cessation of all training across the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) until the organization improved its safety emphasis, compliance, and culture (Bowie, 2019). Furthermore, MINDEF created an Inspector-General's Office (IGO) in 2019 to oversee safety compliance across all units. The IGO could enforce, correct, and discipline all errant units on safety matters (Lim, 2019). Over the years, MINDEF approved and supported systemic safety initiatives to combat and reduce training non-compliance, resulting in a decrease in accidents and an increase in public confidence in the NS system. Despite the effort, non-compliance with training doctrines is still the top causal factor of training deaths in the Singapore Army.



Each year, the Korean Army must enlist at least 200,000 Soldiers to maintain its military power. Failure to do so equates to a huge national security threat for South Korea. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Oneg Plisner)

Non-Compliance with Training Doctrines

Training doctrines provide NCOs with strict instructions and guidance on the proper and safe conduct of training. NCOs follow and abide by training doctrines to safely achieve the desired training outcomes, and at times seek approval from their direct superiors for deviations due to changes in training aims. Superiors authorize training plans and deviations to legalize training at all echelons. Non-compliance with training doctrines causes accidents, injuries, and deaths to Soldiers.

The COI's examination of the three training deaths in the Singapore Army revealed how non-compliance with training doctrines caused deaths.

- A scout jeep ejected a Soldier from the rear seat and injured him fatally. The deceased breached the TSR when he did not wear his helmet or buckle his seat belt before the training. Also, the conducting officer did not adhere to the TSR when he appointed a non-licensed jeep operator for the training.
- An armored IFV crushed a Soldier to death during a reversal maneuver at night. The IFV overturned and landed on the victim, who fell out of the turret. This Soldier contravened the TSR as he did not instruct the IFV's operator to turn on the headlights before reversing without the NVD during night operation.
- The failure to provide prompt medical treatment caused the death of a Soldier after he showed symptoms of heat injury.

The conducting officer breached medical safety SOP by not allowing the Soldier's evacuation at the earliest indication of distress.

NCOs could have prevented the accidents and deaths in these three case studies if they had reported non-compliance with training doctrines at the earliest instance.

Reporting Non-Compliance with Training Doctrines

Early reporting of non-compliance with training doctrines enables senior leadership to find training abnormalities and violations on the ground. Senior leadership can cease training, review the training ecosystem, and remove errant trainers from positions of influence for the safety of the Soldiers.

Fellow NCOs could have saved the life of Soldier #1 if they had informed the supervising officer about the danger of choosing an unlicensed jeep operator and that the deceased did not wear his helmet and seat belt before the convoy.

The IFV operator could have prevented the demise of Soldier #2 if he had refused to reverse his IFV in the dark without an NVD and reported the infringement up the chain of command.

Soldier #3's NCOs could have prevented his death if they had reported the lack of sufficient sleep to the supervising officer of the fast march training due to



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the unauthorized punishment session the night prior. Likewise, the safety officer of the fast march training could have reported his conducting officer for breaches of TSR to his supervising officer.

Early reporting on training non-compliance could have saved the lives of the three Soldiers in our case studies. The ethical triangle reveals the viability of reporting training non-compliance to minimize training deaths in the Singapore Army.

Application of the Ethical Triangle

The ethical triangle is a solution framework that suggests courses of action through three different sides of ethical reasoning, namely, the rules, outcome, and virtue lenses. The ethical triangle framework enables the user to view different perspectives and use sound ethical judgment to select the best solution for an ethical issue or dilemma (Kem, n.d.). The Army utilizes the ethical triangle as a tool to guide its leaders when faced with challenging scenarios.

Rules Lens

The rules lens refers to a principles-based approach to solutioning (Kem, n.d.). A solution carries more weight if it adheres to legitimate laws or instructions.

Reporting training non-compliance shows adherence to TSR and safety protocols in the Singapore Army. MINDEF empowers all Soldiers to take responsibility for ensuring training safety (Aw, 2018).

Outcome Lens

The outcome lens is a consequences-based approach to reasoning (Kem, n.d.). A solution receives more emphasis if it yields a better outcome for the masses. Military training usually involves a community of NCOs. At times, NCOs refuse to report training non-compliance due to fear of unfair retaliation and disgruntlement from errant commanders and fellow battle buddies, respectively. But NCOs who report offenders ensure leadership awareness and their peers’ protection.

Virtue Lens

The virtue lens considers “what an ethical person would do” if that person were in your shoes (Kem, n.d.). A solution gains significance if it displays the proper values in the given circumstances. NCOs show integrity, courage, and professionalism when they report their errant superiors or peers for training non-compliance to higher authority. Offenders may feel betrayed by the reporting

NCOs who are their subordinates or battle buddies. Nevertheless, an ethical person with strong values and character will report training non-compliance impartially. Training safety is the responsibility of NCOs in both the Singapore and U.S. Armies.

NCOs' Role in Training Safety in The Singapore Army

Safety is one of the core values of the SAF and its Services (Ministry of Defense, 2022). As the backbone of the Singapore Army, NCOs must uphold safety standards and enforce compliance with safety regulations and doctrines in all activities, especially during training, where risks are higher. Additionally, one of the roles of all NCOs is to be a safety advocate. NCOs on the ground during training serve as watchful eyes to keep a lookout for safety issues and concerns. NCOs are responsible for reporting training non-compliance upward to higher authority. This active reporting is part of the Singapore Army's effort to inculcate a zero-accident mindset in its leaders and Soldiers.

As part of professional promotion and education, NCOs complete safety courses along their path to career advancement to aid them in their duties as safety stewards of the Singapore Army. In 2010, the SAF approved the proposal to allow NCOs to assume safety training roles, acknowledging NCOs' experience and expertise in these training matters. NCOs must remain steadfast in their pursuit of safety excellence to ensure that every Singaporean's son and daughter returns home to their families at the end of the day.

NCOs' Role in Training Safety in the U.S. Army

The Department of the Army (2025b) NCO Creed states: "Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind — accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers" (p. 48). This promise signifies NCOs' responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of their Soldiers. NCOs have an obligation to the nation and public to bring Soldiers safely back from training. Also, the Department of the Army (2025c) highlighted NCO roles in training.

Two primary tasks of the NCO are first, to ensure Soldiers' proficiency in their individual trade, and second, to understand and enforce training standards. Risk is inherent in all military training. Managing risk is, therefore, part of the Soldiers' proficiency in training, which means safety is one of the desired outcomes for all training activities.



Then-Chief of Defense Force (CDF), Lieutenant-General Melvyn Ong, emphasized that the Singapore Army had to prioritize safety regardless of how long it might take (Boey, 2019). (U.S. Navy photo by Chief Mass Communication Specialist Shannon M. Smith)

Dodson Jr. (2025) posited that generational and societal norms after the COVID-19 pandemic caused NCOs to lack the communication skills needed to correct mistakes, especially with peers and superiors. NCOs ensure standards and discipline in daily activities. These are important as they support orders and readiness, which increases the chances of mission success.

Ethical and courageous NCOs don't accept training non-compliance and correct their superiors and peers for the safety of their Soldiers. Moral and responsible superiors and peers acknowledge their mistakes and review and correct training to enhance safety in the organization.

Harris (2024) emphasized the key role NCOs play in strengthening the Army profession. The U.S. Army depends on NCOs to create an environment of excellence that influences the organization. NCOs must uphold and demonstrate strong values, standards, and ethics in their actions to create trust, boost morale, and build resilient teams. By having the courage to right the wrongs identified during training, NCOs maintain high standards by following training doctrines and ensuring the safety of their Soldiers. Moreover, NCOs help prevent training fatalities and boost public confidence and civil-military relationships by being professional and taking care of their Soldiers.

Conclusion

NCOs, whether in the Singapore Army or the U.S. Army, share similar roles and responsibilities to uphold standards and prioritize their Soldiers' welfare. This article showed the huge impact of NCOs on the training safety through the case studies of training deaths in the Singapore Army. NCOs must report non-compliance with training doctrines promptly to minimize training deaths and strengthen public confidence in the Army.

The ethical triangle proves that NCOs can reduce training deaths and increase public support of the Army in the process. Ultimately, the sacred task of NCOs is to make sure that their Soldiers return home to their

loved ones when the sun sets. The Singapore Army and the U.S. Army must continue to amplify the significant role and impact of NCOs across all echelons regarding training safety. ■

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