

Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean with General Winston Choo

Singapore Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean At The Launch Of A Soldier At Heart Memoir Of LG (Retd) Winston Choo

Transcript of speech by SM Teo Chee Hean, Coordinating Minister for National Security, at the launch.



Senior Minister Teo Chee Hean with General Winston Choo

General Winston Choo and Mrs Choo, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues and Comrades, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good evening to all of you. I am happy to join all of you here this evening to celebrate the launch of General Winston Choo's memoir, "A Soldier At Heart". This is an apt title, for it captures the essence of a truly remarkable man. From the time he joined the Boys Brigade as a young teenager through his long career in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and as our Ambassador to various countries and Chairman of the Singapore Red Cross, General Choo was a soldier at heart and served Singapore with the heart of a soldier. As General Choo said in his book, he always wanted to be a soldier. At the time of self-government for Singapore, he joined the Singapore Volunteer Corps at the age of 17, and then embarked on a full-fledged military career two years later by signing up for officer-training at the Federation Military College in 1960. As a young officer, when Singapore was part of Malaysia, he saw action during Konfrontasi and the 1960s race riots in Singapore. After our independence, he was Aide-de-Camp to our country's first Head of State, President Yusof Ishak. You may not have realised this, but many of you were carrying a photo of the young Winston Choo in your wallets. You can see General Winston Choo on one of our $50 notes, standing beside the President at the opening of our first sitting of Parliament on 22 December 1965. General Choo has made a great many important contributions to Singapore. The most important of his contributions has been to the development of the SAF. He is a key pillar in the SAF's history. He was there at the very beginning, already serving at independence, and he led the SAF through its formative years. From 1974 until his retirement in 1992 – a full 18 years – he was first Director General Staff, then Chief of the General Staff, and then Chief of Defence Force. General Choo built National Service as an institution,

professionalised the three Services, and developed a solid foundation for the Joint Staff and fully integrated tri-service SAF of today. Just as important, or perhaps even more so, General Choo shaped the culture and the values of the SAF. Not by issuing orders alone but by himself living and breathing these values. Winston Choo epitomised the SAF and led by example. He parachuted and dived, jogged with his men, and went into the trenches with them. He cared deeply about his soldiers, and spent long hours talking with them, listening to their problems, and getting to know them and their families. I had the privilege to serve under General Choo's command throughout my career in the SAF. I observed him and learnt from him. I saw how he valued his soldiers, sailors and airmen, and engaged them easily. They trusted him because of his open and sincere manner. He believed that a robust esprit de corps was the glue that would bind the SAF and make it strong. And he succeeded in nurturing that esprit de corps in our pioneer servicemen even though they had very different origins and experiences – the volunteer corps, the Police, the Malaysian Armed Forces – together with a new crop of home-grown, SAFTI trained officers. General Choo instilled in them a sense of mission to serve our young nation. He led and guided generations of SAF officers who helped him bring the SAF forward – our SAF forward. General Choo's considerable people skills also served Singapore very well through the relationships he developed with other armed forces and their top leaderships in countries in our region and beyond.

He built friendships based on mutual respect and shared interests that have lasted to this day. Some were formed from his cadet days at FMC, as his senior classmen, peers and juniors rose to the top of the Malaysian and Bruneian armed forces. It is a testament to the regard that they have for him that some came to visit him when he was recovering from his illnesses. He had equally warm personal ties with the top Indonesian generals who played politically influential roles in the Soeharto era. These relationships with our closest neighbours which General Choo nurtured continue to be of great value to the SAF and Singapore to this day. In this area too, I was fortunate to have benefited from observing and learning from General Choo how to engage foreign military and political leaders, how to win their trust, how to put forward our positions in a friendly but firm way, advancing cooperation and friendship while safeguarding our interests. Today, I continue to meet many foreign leaders and officials whom I first met when I accompanied General Choo during his meetings with them. I was a little guy sitting in the corner and taking notes. Several of them I met just in the last fwew days in Brunei, and they send you their warmest greetings. Since all of us have served in the SAF, or have grandfathers, fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons, and now perhaps daughters and sisters, who have

served in the SAF, it is no exaggeration to say that General Choo has had an impact on every Singaporean. Many remember him fondly as a “living legend”. The publication of this memoir has triggered glowing memories of General Choo on Facebook. One said: “I would have followed him anywhere.” I would have followed him anywhere. Another, that “He is the definition of a man who puts home and country before all else.” Indeed, General Choo’s life has been one of service to his country. I am glad that he has given us this memoir. It is more than just the life story of a remarkable man.

It also reminds us of how far we have come as a nation, and of the massive challenges that we had to overcome to enjoy the security we have today. This book is a legacy not just to General Choo’s children and grandchildren but to all Singaporeans, especially those who serve in General Choo’s beloved SAF – past,present and future – to make Singapore more secure. I want to thank General Choo for being a role model to me and to all our servicemen in the SAF. I also wish to thank Kate, General Choo’s ever gracious wife, who has been by his side through his life’s journey. Thank you for your kindness to me and my wife, for all the wonderful dinners and post-dinner drinks you hosted for us, and for encouraging General Choo to work on this memoir. According to last weekend’s Sunday Times, this book is already the number one non-fiction bestseller in Singapore, and having read it, I can fully understand why. This is the perfect occasion to launch the book – two days before General Choo’s 80th birthday. Congratulations, General Choo! I wish you a very happy birthday, and many more to come in the years ahead. It is with great pleasure that I join General Choo in launching this book. Thank you.