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Show

ARMY? ON!

Jack Neo reminisces fondly about his days as a soldier

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HE WAS what some would call a "siao on" (madly enthusiastic) soldier. He signed on with the army after his O levels, at 17, and spent more than eight years in it.

Even at 52 now, local movie director Jack Neo, who went to Officer Cadet School (OCS), says his days in green were "quite fun".

He told The New Paper in a recent interview: "I told my wife and sons that I really miss army life.

"I miss the times when (my platoon mates and I) went through everything together, including the times when the instructors 'tortured' us.

"The fun of (army life) is in its discipline and (the) unity (shown by soldiers)."

Lieutenant Neo Chee Keong, as he was known back then, was a quartermaster for two to three years after OCS.

In 1980, he became platoon commander of the 1st Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment's Charlie Company at Guillemard Camp.

He trained the soldiers there for six months before transferring to the Music & Drama Company, where he spent the rest of his days in the army, before leaving in 1986 as a lieutenant.

Of his days as an instructor, Neo said he didn't especially "tekan" (bully) his charges.

There were times when he shouted at them, but it wasn't directed at the platoon as a whole.

Said Neo: "I think I told the soldiers to run across the parade square to 'kiss' a tree and run back.

"It was a tradition passed down from my instructors. When your instructors 'tekan' you in the past, you 'tekan' your soldiers later."

This form of punishment is included in Neo's latest movie, Ah Boys To Men Part 1, which is about a motley group of recruits doing their Basic Military Training.

The two-hour long movie opens here tomorrow and Part 2 will be released on Feb 7. Both movies cost \$3 million to make.

It stars new faces like local YouTube personalities Tosh Zhang and Noah Yap, getai singer Wang Weiliang and aspiring actor Joshua Tan.

Apart from local celebrities like Irene



Ang, Liu Qianyi and getai singer Wang Lei who had supporting roles in the film. Neo also roped in the directors of several local companies for guest appearances. (See report on right.)

Neo said that his army stint was also a time when he was full of energy.

He was physically very fit and could carry a soldier up Peng Kang Hill, a steep hill in Pasir Laba, in less than 10 minutes, Neo recalled.

Neo also revealed that because he became an officer at only 18, some of the older but lower-ranked soldiers looked down on him.

And when he was in OCS, he was the youngest in his platoon as other trainees were polytechnic graduates and aged around 20.

However, they took care of him and treated him like their younger brother, he said.

Neo added that his English wasn't good then and sometimes he couldn't understand what the instructors said.

He also had to look up the meaning of some English words in his training manual in a dictionary.

Lightning accident

A tragedy mars the memory of his OCS days. "One month before we passed out of OCS, we were taking part in our last defence exercise on Hill 265 in Marsiling. It was raining heavily and one of my platoon mates was struck dead by lightning," he said.

"That was why a big lightning rod was later installed on Hill 265."

Next year, the army tradition will continue in the Neo family when his 18-year-old son enlists.

He didn't want to reveal his son's name because he doesn't want the teen to have the pressure of being known as Jack Neo's son when he enlists.

Neo doesn't think his son will receive preferential treatment because "there are no benefits to begin with". Everyone's equal in the army, he maintained.

"My wife is nervous about him going into the army. I think most mothers are like that because they aren't familiar with national service," said Neo.

He added: "I told my wife it's okay. I did a lot of research for this movie. The army now is very different from before.

"Young teens have to go through the army to be men. I wouldn't think of telling my son to 'take cover' (to escape training or duties) when he's in the army.

"He and his friends are also quite excited to be enlisted after seeing some of the movie footage."

Neo's looking for his old army mates

WERE you in the army with Lieutenant Neo Chee Keong? Jack Neo is organising a reunion and looking for his Officer Cadet School mates in Bravo Company, Platoon 6, Section 2 in 1977 and the soldiers he trained in the 1st Battalion Singapore Infantry Regiment's Charlie Company in 1980.

You can e-mail him at oldplatoon@gmail.com.

TRAINING HARD: A movie still from Ah Boys To Men Part 1.

PICTURE COURTESY OF GOLDEN VILLAGE



PICTURE COURTESY OF JTEAM PRODUCTIONS

DOING THEIR PART: Jack Neo (in white) with (from left) the chairman of Sakae Holdings, Mr Douglas Foo; the regional director of Asia Pacific Breweries, Mr Bennett Neo; the managing director of Ebenezer NDT Services, Mr Lawrence Kim; the managing director of FarEastFlora.com, Mr Ryan Chioh; and the director of Jaz Lai, Mr Jaz Lai.

Company bigwigs make guest appearance in movie

WHEN Mr Bennett Neo was invited to make a guest appearance as a serviceman going to war in Jack Neo's new army movie, Ah Boys To Men, he agreed readily.

He did so even though it meant shuffling some work appointments and taking two days of leave for the filming.

In a recent interview with The New Paper, the regional director of Asia Pacific Breweries said he wanted to play a part in the film that commemorates 45 years of national service.

To Neo, it doesn't matter whether you are a salesman or a chief executive officer, you have to fulfil your national service and reservist duties as long as you're a Singapore male.

Interestingly, filming was done, literally, on his grandfather's road.

Mr Neo's grandfather, Neo Tiew, was a landowner and developed the area in Lim Chu Kang in 1914.

The abandoned Neo Tiew housing estate was where some of the war scenes in the movie were filmed.

Mr Neo, 43, told us he lived in the Neo Tiew area as a child before his family moved out in 1976.

Going back to his childhood home was a great and interesting experience, he said.

Besides Mr Neo, the managing director of FarEastFlora.com, Mr Ryan Chioh; the chairman of Sakae Holdings, Mr Douglas Foo; the managing director of

Ebenezer NDT Services, Mr Lawrence Kim; and the director of Jaz Lai, Mr Jaz Lai, were also invited by Neo to make guest appearances in his film.

They played reservists called up to defend Singapore when it comes under attack from an unknown military force.

Their participation in Ah Boys To Men came about when Jack Neo asked Mr Foo, 43, and the executive chairman of Qian Hu Corp, Mr Kenny Yap, to be in the movie.

Mr Foo and Mr Yap then sent an e-mail to their friends in the Young Business Leaders network and got Mr Neo, Mr Chioh and Mr Kim on board.

Mr Yap was unable to go for filming subsequently.

In the name of fun

Mr Chioh, 42, told TNP in a separate interview that the filming was all in the name of fun.

"We wanted to relive our national service days together," he said. "I think the audience won't be able to spot us because we had camouflage paint on our faces."

Mr Chioh added: "When the men were younger, they probably think national service is a waste of time, but it instills discipline and initiative in them."

Mr Foo said all of them didn't want to be paid for their work in the film.

"You can't put a dollar value to our friendship (with each other) and to the purpose of the movie," he said.



YOUNG GUN: Jack Neo was around 17 when this photo of him in Officer Cadet School was taken.

PICTURE COURTESY OF JACK NEO