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FROM PILOT TO ENTREPRENEUR: THE JOURNEY OF AN EX- MILITARY PILOT

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Chin Pak Chuen worked at food stalls as a teenager for pocket money. Now retired from the military, the former soldier is carving out a second career with a smartphone food app

When five F-16 fighter jets roared through Singapore's skies to kick off the 2015 National Day Parade (NDP) aerial display, it was in tribute to the country's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Citizens celebrated the memory and legacy of the country's late leader as the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) followed up with a special fly-past in an unprecedented "50" formation to mark the country's fiftieth anniversary as an independent nation. Everywhere one looked there was sea of red and white and one-off memorabilia created to mark "SG50".

But at 7pm, as it had been for many years, a familiar sight greeted Singaporeans: a CH-47 Chinook helicopter soaring over the Padang with a giant State Flag attached to it. The Chinook's arrival is timed to coincide with the start of the National Anthem in a display of patriotism as citizens belt out their best rendition of Majulah Singapura. What if the flag shows up late or, worse, not at all?

"As squadron commander, I was directly responsible for the flag," states **Chin Pak Chuen**, former Helicopter Group Commander at Sembawang Airbase and commander of the 127 Squadron, which was in charge of flying the State Flag at the NDP. "If the flag tears or it folds in the wrong way, then I am responsible. If the flag does not show up on time at the parade, or if it arrives too early, I get the blame.

"I was the Squadron commander in 2006. All squadron commanders must go through the baptism of fire, which is to fly the flag. At first, it's an honour but when reality hits, nerves take over. My colleagues would say, 'What if the President doesn't see a flag?' That simply cannot happen!"

LEARNING TO FLY PART 1: THE AIR FORCE

Fortunately for Chin that scenario never came to pass, and the 46-year-old retired from military service at the end of 2014, capping a distinguished 27-year career with the RSAF. However, Chin had applied for a teaching scholarship before enlisting for National Service in 1987, believing a condition he was born with had rendered his dream of being a combat pilot impossible.

"During Junior College, we had an Outward Bound excursion at Pulau Ubin," Chin recalls. "There was still a risk of malaria back then so participants were expected to take Maloprim tablets. I couldn't take the tablets because I was born with the G6PD blood deficiency.

"However, I didn't realise that the blood transfusion I had when I was a month old had cleared me of the deficiency. My birth certificate still showed I had G6PD, so I was concerned that I would not be able to go to Pulau Tekong for my Basic Military Training (BMT), which means I could not do combat training."

"As squadron commander, I was directly responsible for the flag. If the flag does not show up on time at the parade, I get the blame."

- Chin Pak Chuen, former Commander, RSAF 127 Squadron

When doctors at his enlistment medical checkup cleared him of G6PD, Chin applied for and was awarded the SAF Overseas Training Award (OTA) scholarship, which was the third most prestigious scholarship behind the President's Scholarship and the SAF Overseas Scholarship. Instead of receiving a monthly allowance of \$110 as a National Serviceman, Chin got about \$800 as an officer cadet, which became \$1200 upon commission as an officer. It was a considerable sum of money for a 19-year-old in 1980's Singapore, and it was available to Chin even when he was studying.

"The SAF would pay me while I am studying, whereas at that time the PSC scholarship only gave allowance," says Chin, looking back on the decision to take up the OTA scholarship. "If I sign on [as a SAF regular], and if I get the scholarship, I can go to any university I choose provided I am accepted.

"And I get paid during the three years that I am in university. I also get an allowance. It was a great deal for someone making \$110 a month at the time."

Chin graduated from Imperial College London with a Physics degree in 1991 and returned to Singapore to commence two long years of pilot training, which started with some 30 over sorties in an SIAI-Marchetti SF.260 trainer.

"From sorties one to nine, the instructor flies with you," Chin says. "The instructor explains how the instruments work, how to do a landing etc. By the ninth sortie, the instructor will give you simulated emergencies to test your knowledge and ability to bring the plane back safely. Once he's sure you can handle it, they'll clear you to fly solo.

"The first solo is simple: take off, do a circuit around Seletar [Air Base], land, and taxi back. It's just to gain confidence."

Chin flew solo on his tenth sortie where he went through the drills. One of them involved reducing the plane's speed by lowering the flaps before landing, but the flaps stayed still when he hit the lever.

"This kind of situation has happened before, and we were trained for it. But when it actually happens – on your first solo flight, no less – *wah lau!*" he exclaims in classic Singlish. "So I did

my emergency drill: call the control tower to inform them about the emergency, and everybody was scrambled clear of the runway.

“Without the lowered flap, I had to come in at a higher speed. I slowed down by lifting the nose and laid off the throttle. I was still going 20 percent faster than usual because the aircraft would stall if I went any slower.”

When he landed, Chin received the traditional welcome following a trainee’s first solo flight: the initiation rite. “After your first solo, your instructor and course mates will bring a bucket of water, rotten eggs and whatnot to throw at you. Every trainee got it but I got it especially bad because of what I put my instructor through,” he recalls with a wry smile.

LEARNING TO FLY PART 2: THE STARTUP SCENE

Given the dangers of being a pilot, Chin says his family was concerned but at the same time delighted with his winning the scholarship: “Our family was quite poor so they (parents) were quite happy that I got a scholarship. The worry that flying is dangerous did not hit them so much.”

Chin’s humble background had led him to do part-time work as a teenager. He has made and sold a Singapore hawker classic, Chicken Rice, and worked as a hawker’s assistant at seafood stalls. As he approached the SAF’s stipulated retirement age of 50, Chin did a Master of Science in Innovation at SMU, which led him to develop a food-related app – “DingGo” – which he pitches as the “Uber of the Food and Entertainment industries” on his LinkedIn profile.

“We give merchants the app, and they can use it to advertise flash offers,” says Chin of DingGo, which he has just launched with a small number of F&B establishments. “They’ll send out an alert an hour before lunchtime advertising an offer that expires within a certain timeframe. If a customer takes up the offer by clicking on the app, he gets a confirmation code which is shown to the merchant when he gets to the restaurant. Once he is seated, the loop is closed and we make a dollar from the restaurant.”

To test his idea, Chin teamed up with SMU officials who ran events and had buffet food and beverages catered for them. Chin got the event organisers to sign up for the app, which is then used to notify SMU students of any available unconsumed food or beverages.

Thus far, the business idea has won over his SMU professors to agree to send his team to Bangkok earlier this year to compete in an Asia-wide business plan competition, the Asia Venture Challenge, in which his team came in third. Upon his return, Chin was accepted into an incubation programme with SMU’s Business Innovations Generator (BIG) as part of the Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship (IIE).

Chin is also currently finalising another deal with Singapore media company MediaCorp through its Mediapreneur Incubator programme to develop his idea, and although non-disclosure clauses prevent him from revealing the dollar amount invested in his venture, MediaCorp’s website lists the investments as between S\$20,000 to S\$50,000 (US\$14,200 to US\$35,500).

While his history with food provides the stepping stone to his future – “I can imagine now how the bosses of the stalls I used to work at would use this app” – one question remains: what if the app does not take off? When would the business need to start pivoting to a new strategy?

“That will probably be two to three months after the product launch,” says Chin. “But as far as slight adjustments are concerned, I expect that to happen from the very minute someone uses the app to push out an offer.

“It’s the same in the military: no plans survive the first contact,” he adds before letting out a hearty laugh. “You can do all the planning you want, but once you hit the battlefield everything goes out the window. It happens in the military and I’m sure it will happen here.”

Looking ahead, moving on

As National Day rolled around for 2015, Chin looked back at a long career highlighted by the flying of the State Flag at the NDP in 2006. Since then, he has been training younger pilots to fly the flag every year. When asked about his feelings on being an onlooker instead of a participant for Singapore's fiftieth birthday bash, the former pilot expressed mixed feelings.

"Initially I felt left out during the rehearsals," he confesses. "During the last rehearsal, one of my SMU classmates saw the helicopters flying past with the flag and she sent me a picture of them on a group chat. She said, 'Chin, you've groomed an excellent successor.'

"It dawned on me: Sometimes I have to let go. It's good that I can leave an organisation and it continues to be in good hands. It felt good to hear it from someone else that things still run smoothly."

Somewhere, Singapore's founding Prime Minister would likely nod in appreciation of that sentiment.

Chin Pak Chuen recently graduated from SMU's Master of Science in Innovation (MI) programme as part of the inaugural batch of SMU Warriors Scholarship awardees. He is currently building up [DingGo](#), an app to "get the best last minute deals for food, shopping and shows".