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EDUCATION FOR A SECOND CAREER

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Two former soldiers go from the business of waging war to waging war in business

In his 27 years with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), **Chin Pak Chuen** was drilled as all soldiers are: failure is not an option. As he approached the end of his time as a professional soldier, Chin pursued a postgraduate degree to fulfill his dream of becoming an entrepreneur. His second career, however, would require him to embrace what the military would find abhorrent: failure.

“In the SAF, failure is not an option,” says the former Helicopter Group Commander at Sembawang Airbase. “We plan, we rehearse, and we win the battle. For example, if we fly the national flag, we make sure there are three flags in the sky to make sure there is a flag fly-past for the parade.

“In the startup community, there is a different mindset. Failure is also not an option; it is mandatory. You’re expected to fail, and then to learn from the failure. That’s something I had to adjust to.”

Real-world lessons in the classroom

The former Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) helicopter pilot was speaking to *Perspectives @SMU* on the sidelines of the recent graduation ceremony for the inaugural batch of graduates from the SMU Warriors Scholarship (SWS) programme. The most important lessons he learnt in SMU’s Master of Science in Innovation (MI) programme came from fellow entrepreneurs who have succeeded.

“CEOs, startup founders, investors and entrepreneurs come in and tell us about what they know about the commercial marketplace,” Chin explains. “We were trained to look for the pain points of companies. We go to malls and examine what the retailers’ pain points are. It’s as real as it gets with regard to understanding the industry.”

"In the startup community, failure is also not an option; it is mandatory."

Chin, who is currently working on an app that connects ‘nearby customers’ with ‘last-minute available seats’ at food and beverage outlets, describes what he learnt from those who have come before him.

“One important thing these people taught us was negotiation. We had a module that taught us how to negotiate with venture capitalists, and that is not something you get everywhere. We have

VCs coming to class to tell us, 'Look, from my eyes, this is what I see and this is how I expect you to negotiate.'

"The other thing is pitching. For what we do [tech startups], we need to pitch and generate investor interest. We were taught presentation and pitching skills to do that. We learn from people who have pitched and gone on to build successful businesses."

Another SWS graduate, **Yong Wui Chiang**, also highlighted the benefits of learning from real-world experiences. The former Army Chief Knowledge Officer graduated from the Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) programme, where he says the biggest lessons often come from fellow students.

"I chose EMBA because I wanted to learn from my classmates real-life experiences," says the 30-year army veteran who now does strategic planning at a government ministry. "In one of the classes we were talking about an IPO. We had an entrepreneur in the class who spoke about the real-world experience of what launching an IPO really entails."

"He spoke about his experiences with the bank and investors, and even how his wife reacted to what was happening. He also spoke about dealing with failure and then going for another IPO. These are experiences you don't often get in a classroom. What I get in return exceeds the effort I had to put in."

A second career

Even as both men embark on their second careers, the former officers looked back at how their postgraduate education equipped them for the next chapter.

"I've always wanted to do an MBA but I didn't have the right time or reason to do so," Yong muses. "In my last 10 years in the army, [the SAF] has moved towards a learning culture. We recognise that there is a constant need to learn not only as an individual but as an organisation. Even senior officers have to learn new things and recognise that the world is changing."

Echoing the need to change, Chin echoes, "SAF is a hierarchical organisation that goes by rank. Here, I have to drop my rank to communicate with classmates who are half my age. It opened my eyes to the biases that I had, and now I can really connect with the younger folks and know what they think and communicate. As a result, I can collaborate with them – my Chief Technical Officer is a 20-year-old fresh graduate from the School of Information Systems here at SMU!"

Despite the need to adapt, Yong points out the importance of maintaining focus on the big picture and that some things never change.

"My personal experience of being in missions in war-torn areas such as Afghanistan tells me that nation-building requires collaboration with the commercial, civil, and public sectors. Business has a role in society and it complements what I learnt in the military. IT enriched my knowledge of how different parts of society work together."

"I still have to exercise leadership. I still have to motivate and lead by example and contribute. All that hasn't changed and the SAF experience has been helpful in that."