

[Source: Scholars' Choice III, The Straits Times, 2 March 2007, Friday]

In the Service of the Country

Five Singapore Armed Forces overseas scholars have their sights set on careers that are challenging and fulfilling.

By Geraldine Tan

Mr Wu Jianmin admits that he had applied for the Singapore Armed Forces Overseas Scholarship (Safos) without much knowledge of what life in the military was like.

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[ICAAS Editor: Hong Wenxian won the WSPC-ICAAS Award for Best JC Science Student in 2005]

His counterpart and President's Scholar Hong Wenxian shares the same desire to do his bit for Singapore. The 2-year-old, who is studying mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says: "I felt that I had a stake in the future of Singapore, and the scholarship was one way for me to do my part."

"As an officer in the SAF, I will gain a better understanding of the entire spectrum of society. I picked the Safos because I believe I would turn out a better leader and better person."

For two other Safos scholars Edwin Chua and Ren Jinfeng, both materials science students at London's Imperial College, the scholarship was their ticket to learn from the best at one of the world's top-rated engineering faculties.

Says Mr Ren, 22: "I chose this course because it requires more inter-disciplinary knowledge, and the subject – about fundamental understanding of materials and the innovation of new and better ones – appeals to me."

Twenty-year old Mr Chua says the course is fuelling his fascination with biomaterials: "I am particularly interested in ideas such as how the United States military is looking at looking to deer antlers for ideas on how to strengthen their Kevlar vests."

Technical knowledge aside, the Safos scholars agree that university life now, in tandem with what they learn at the SAF, will equip them with tools for life.

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As with any student living abroad, all five thrive on the rigorous academic environments and work hard at scoring top marks.

At the same time they are broadening their horizons – exploring new hobbies and extra-curricular activities, bonding within the close-knit Singaporean community on campus, and traveling widely.

Homesickness, if any, is quickly forgotten because university life has so much to offer. Mr Chua says: “I don’t really feel homesick, what with there being loads of new experiences. Everything is a highlight!”

And just as they chalk up distinctive experiences while at university, the varied posts the SAF has in store for them hold endless challenges and possibilities. All five are certain that the skills picked up within the unique organization will serve them well, wherever life may take them.

Mr Ren explains: “The highly volatile political and security environment requires the SAF to be sensitive and responsive towards changes. Hence, it is necessary to develop such skills as leadership, communication and management.”

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Because challenges await at every turn, the armed forces produce people who are adaptable, nimble and versatile, the scholars concur.

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Eager to plunge into their careers, the five scholars are looking forward to applying the valuable lessons learnt from university, as well as learning more and passing the knowledge on to others.

Says Mr Hong: “As much as the scholarship is leaving its mark on my life, I wish to make a positive difference on the lives of those I lead as well.”