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i say

TOO LOW A PRICE ON DUTY

TERENCE TEO

I REFER to the report, "Stiffer penalties for NS dodgers" (April 4). I am glad that Parliament is treating this issue seriously and is considering various measures, including changes to the statutes. As an NSman, I am very keen to see how our Government handles this issue.

Like the majority of Singaporean males, I dutifully enlisted when I completed my pre-university studies. I spent three months on Pulau Tekong undergoing basic military training, after which I was given further training and posted to an Singapore Armed Forces unit where I spent the rest of my 30-month National Service (NS) stint.

I did guard duty and individual physical proficiency tests, burned some Saturdays and Sundays, made some lifelong friends and discovered the heights – and depths – of the human spirit and the true meaning of comradeship.

After completing full-time NS, I enrolled in the National University of

Singapore, which had kept my place in the faculty of my choice, and graduated with honours. When I started work, I was also called up as an active reservist, and started my 13-year cycle.

I was posted to a combat unit, and during my in-camp training each year, went through the whole lot: Range qualification, field deployments, further training in Operation Starlight, so on ... When I turned 40, I was officially placed on the dormant list.

Was I stupid to go through all this? Or was it that we didn't have enough money to "buy" me out of NS?

The issue must go beyond simply asking how high a price a draft-dodger should pay for evading NS. With the latest changes, the maximum fine has been doubled to \$10,000 and the maximum jail term kept at three years. Is \$10,000 or \$100,000 enough? Or should we perhaps equate NS to five years' jail, maybe 10?

Imposing more fines and asking for bigger security deposits is simply sending the signal that if you can afford to pay the fine or forego the deposit, you can do whatever you want.

In fact, some people I know have actually said they applaud draft dodgers for escaping NS by simply paying a fine, and hope their children can do the same.

When the Government ascribes a monetary punishment to avoiding NS, we parents may be tempted to conclude that paying a fine is a reasonable alternative to putting our sons through two years of national service and 13 years of reservist In-Camp Training. Since we consider our children to be priceless, the logical conclusion is that no price is too high. What is \$100,000 to secure your son's freedom?

To me, a draft-dodger can never do

enough time, or pay a big enough fine, to match any NSman's contribution or pay his debt to his country in full.

As the advertisement billboards on MRT trains and TV commercials would have it, an NSman's contribution is paid in blood, toil, tears and sweat. You cheapen it when you measure it with money, or when you offer a prison term as a substitute.

Here then lies the real issue: NS is a duty, an honour and a privilege, and it is not about how much draft dodgers should be penalised in lieu of doing their duty – but how best to recognise and ascribe a true value to what we NSmen do.

The Government must dispel the notion that we can allow our boys to avoid NS so long as they pay a price. Perhaps it is time to shift the focus away from punishing the draft dodger, to recognising, rewarding and reaffirming the loyal NSman (as has been done in part through tax rebates and payouts such as the Progress Package).

This issue is a challenge, but also an opportunity for the Government to do something that makes NS truly meaningful. If not, it would seem to the legions of fathers, brothers, husbands and sons who stayed to stand guard over this country of ours, that there is one law for the rich, and one for the poor.

As Second Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen said: "Each time we have to impose the penalty, it's our failure to convince everyone on their part in National Service ... When we have reached a point where every family says 'I understand why NS is needed and I'm proud to do it', I think we are getting there."

*This is contributed by a reader,
"an NSman and ready to serve".*

SIMPLER
CHOICES

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Progress Package forms can be downloaded online

Letter from **TEOH SEE LEONG**
Director, (Collections and Recovery),
Central Provident Fund Board

WE REFER to Mr Rashid Osman's letter "Why isn't the option or necessary forms available online?" (April 4). Sign-up forms can be downloaded from the Progress Package

website www.progress.gov.sg (click on: Progress Package > Forms (on the menu bar at the top of the page).

We are sorry that Mr Rashid had difficulty getting through the Progress Package hotline.

We seek the understanding of Singaporeans that delivering the Progress Package to 2.3 million

recipients is a massive exercise.

Last week, we received an additional 25,000 calls on the Progress Package. Some customers may therefore have experienced difficulty getting through to us because of this sudden surge of calls during this period. We thank Mr Rashid for his feedback.

Is S'pore ready for online movie distribution wave?

Letter from **COLIN ONG TAU SHIEN**

IT HAS been reported in AP that Hollywood studios will start selling digital versions of films such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *King Kong* on the Internet through a website, Movieline, which is owned by a number of large Western movie companies.

This move is a step towards full digital distribution of movies over the Internet and its rationale is to combat global movie piracy.

However, I have some issues about this move, especially in the context of Singapore which currently has among the world's highest Internet penetration rate and may eventually have the fastest land broadband speeds.

Firstly, there are a large number of Singaporeans who are working in the movie and movie rental industry here. So, will online distribution translate to job losses for them?

Another area of concern is the

enforcement of our censorship laws.

How will the Media Development Authority mitigate the future problem of minors downloading full-length prohibited movies into their PCs or 3G phones?

Is it more effective to streamline our censorship laws with the rest of the world as this technology is an unstoppable leveller?

I hope the moral values that Singaporeans hold dear will not be eroded by this new wave of technology.

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