

Public Service Commission Local Merit Scholarship

Text by Chan Seet Fun

Hands-on work experience began in dramatic fashion for Major (MAJ) Goh Boon Han of the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF).

It was towards the end of his nine-month Basic Officer Course in early 2004 when he and his fellow cadets came face to face with a major fire in Tuas. The fire had broken out at a perfume factory, which housed various chemicals.

“The flames were three storeys high. You could see the smoke from the expressway,” recalled the 29-year-old Public Service Commission Local Merit Scholar, who is now Officer Commanding of Tampines Fire Station.

“Initially, we were sent to just observe the fire-fighters already at the scene. But when we got there, we also helped out. That was my first fire experience.”

MAJ Goh added that the incident gave him his first taste of the SCDF's culture to “lead from the front”.

“Commanders go in first. If you think that it's not safe to enter, you wouldn't expect the officers under your charge to go in. Once you suit up, your team will follow.”

The experience also taught him that SCDF's mission to protect, and save lives and property requires its personnel to be able to marshal their mental and physical energies to deal with intense situations that might crop up at any time – a challenge that he relishes.

“When the fire is raging, you are like an Energizer rabbit. Running around; giving instructions; getting things done. Only an hour after the fire is put out do you find yourself wondering, ‘Why am I aching?’” he said, with a smile.

He added that besides the intrinsic reward of helping people and getting a difficult situation under control, being in the thick of the action gives him an adrenaline rush that he would not have experienced with most careers.

According to MAJ Goh, he decided to take up the scholarship in 1999, so that he could do “something different” and not be deskbound.

“I don't like to be doing the same thing year after year. At SCDF, every day offers a new experience.”

In addition to helping people on home ground, SCDF personnel are also sent on overseas missions. MAJ Goh was part of the SCDF's Operation Lionheart Contingent that went to Thailand to help out following the devastating tsunami in 2004.

At the time, he had been a Rota Commander at Sengkang Fire Station, his first posting after completing his training course. In 2005, he was posted to the Civil Defence Academy as a senior instructor.

Now, as Officer Commanding, a post he has held since 2007, he is responsible for all the functions – fire, rescue and emergency ambulance services – of Tampines Fire Station and oversees all the operations, training, administration and welfare of the station's 140 staff.

Periodic job rotations ensure that SCDF scholars can look forward to getting involved in different facets of the Home Team. MAJ Goh hopes to move into a policy-making role next.

“We can let HQ know what we hope to do in our next posting and they will determine if it is possible, depending on the timing and so on. There are always new opportunities and new challenges to look forward to.”