

*"You still can't work together properly! You will take turns as sections getting wet and sandy! ... Section 4, wet and sandy! Go!"*

*"Come on, guys," I shouted, sprinting for the sand. We dove into murky green and crawled out onto freckled yellow. We rolled around in the sand, completely coating our uniforms. I cupped sand in my hands and threw it up into my face.*

*Instructor Wayne yelled, "Max, you call that wet and sandy? I can still see your face. Get your face in there!"*

When Max West was called up to perform his mandatory National Service in the Singapore Armed Forces, he was one of just two *ang mohs* posted to the elite Naval Diving Unit. Half-American and half-Singaporean, he was the only trainee who hadn't attended a local school, and was completely out of his element.

In this candid firsthand account, West chronicles the grueling, specialized training the 39th batch endured, as well as the intense camaraderie they forged throughout, revealing what it takes to succeed as a naval diver in the SAF. Unrestrained in its frankness and compellingly told, *How to Forge a Frogman* is a unique coming-of-age story in a singularly Singaporean setting.

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MAX WEST

HOW TO FORGE A FROGMAN

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A RECRUIT'S ACCOUNT OF BASIC TRAINING  
IN SINGAPORE'S NAVAL DIVING UNIT



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For Review only

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## Disclaimer

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*This publication does not represent the views of the Singapore Armed Forces, the Ministry of Defence, or the Republic of Singapore or any of its governing bodies. The opinions expressed are those of the author alone.*

*The names of all regular military personnel and nearly all National Servicemen have been changed for their protection and privacy. Their pseudonyms are entirely fictitious and bear no reflection on actual persons.*

*And, as we all know, people in the Navy do not swear.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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By law, upon completion of their secondary education, all Singaporean men are required to perform 22 months of National Service (NS). At the start of NS, every combat-fit recruit undergoes nine weeks of Basic Military Training (BMT) before being posted to various vocations across the Singapore Armed Forces.

The following account of my BMT was handwritten at the time of its occurrence, day by day, painstakingly and often furtively. Only later was it typed and transcribed for publication. No material was recreated in hindsight.

This is one recruit's story.

## A (BRIEF) GLOSSARY

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*Ang moh* (n.): Literally, “red head.” Generally refers to anyone who appears Caucasian

*Chao keng* (v.): To feign injury for the purposes of evading training or responsibilities

*mee soto* (n.): A noodle soup dish common in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Milo (n.): A chocolate malt beverage popular in Singapore.

*Pang kang* (v.): To be done with work; to be free to go

*Pasar malam* (n.): Literally, “night market.” A street market that opens in the evening, typically around residential neighborhoods

## DRILL COMMANDS

*Sedia*: At attention

*Senang diri*: At ease

*Kekanan pusing*: Right turn

*Kekiri pusing*: Left turn

*Diam*: Strictly at attention; no movement

*Dari kiri*: By the left

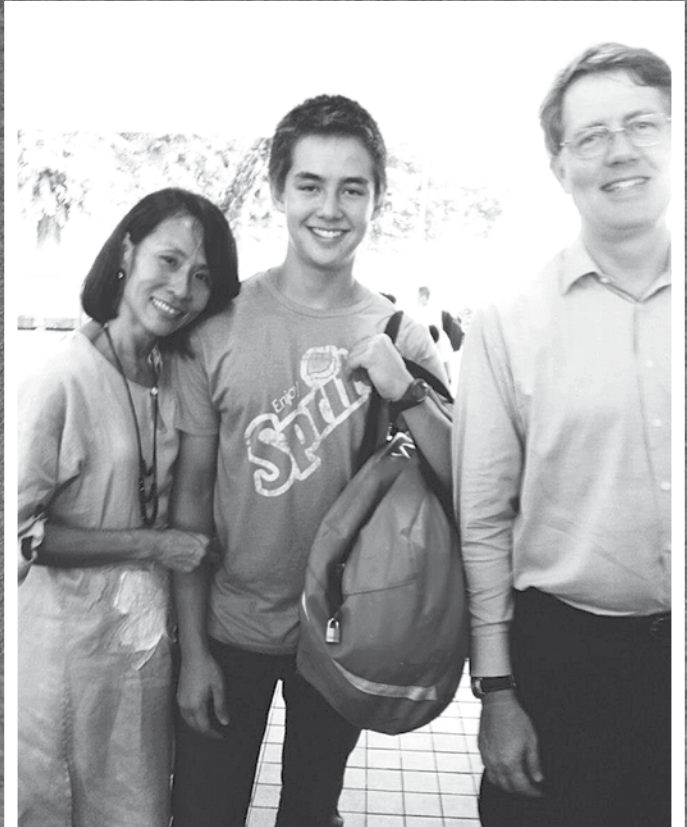
*Cepat jalan*: Quick march

*Hentak kaki*: Quick mark time (march in place)

*Julang senjata*: High port arms

*Berhenti*: Halt

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*The author with his parents on enlistment day, March 11, 2013.*

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WEEK  
**ONE**

## MONDAY, MARCH 11, 2013

Today, on the 11th of the month of March, I enlisted into National Service. I joined the Naval Diving Unit. We're in Sembawang Camp.

There are 100 of us.

I'm nervous.

### IF I MAY

My name is Maximillian, but I go by Max. My father is American and my mom is Singaporean Chinese. I was born and raised in Singapore. I'm 180 cm tall, and weigh 78 kg.

I like to write.

### NAVAL DIVING WHAT?

The Naval Diving Unit is an elite formation of the Singapore Armed Forces. In peacetime, NDU conducts maritime security and counter-piracy operations, underwater search and salvage missions, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.

NDU only has two intakes of National Servicemen each year, each consisting of fewer than 120 enlistees. I wanted to come here, and was lucky to be chosen.

We are the 39th Batch.

### THE FIRST TEST

We had a swimming lesson on Wednesday. We had to wear SAF standard-issue swimwear, which are navy blue triangle trunks. I've never seen so many wedgies in my life. On the bright side, I passed the Category 1 swimming test, our first official evaluation. It's a test of water confidence.

Ivan Tan, a national runner, and I were the first to attempt the test. We donned our number fours, green camouflage-patterned uniforms. The test consisted of a 50-m breaststroke swim, followed by five minutes of treading water. It's untimed, so it makes sense to swim slowly and conserve energy. I was nervous, though, and rushed through the breaststroke, wasting energy. When I started treading water, I was already out of breath. The five minutes felt longer than they should have, but I made it through.

Next, I removed my number four and used the pants to make a float. I tied the legs of the pants into knots and flipped them over my head, trapping air inside. I struggled a bit with the pants inflation, but in the end, I managed to pass. So did Ivan.

The Category 1 test has been our only evaluation so far.

### THE SAF'S NEXT TOP MODEL

Looking around during the Cat 1 test, I noticed a strange assortment of physiques. NDU is one of the fittest units in the SAF, so I thought everybody would be in shape.



Surprisingly, some guys are chubby, and some are really skinny. A few can't even do one proper push-up or pull-up. On the other hand, many are ripped. A handful are bodybuilders, but most are lean and toned.

Nobody wears glasses, which is highly unusual for one hundred Singaporeans. Perfect eyesight is a requirement for naval divers.



There are only two members of 39 who aren't fully Asian. As I'm half-American, I'm one of them. The other is Aneirin Flynn, who's half-British. On enlistment day, I saw him and said, "Hey, you're white, I'm white. Wanna be friends?"

Before enlisting, I thought being half-American would hurt me. I thought I'd be picked on to do extra work or tougher training, and that it might be tougher to make friends. In truth, it's been the opposite. The novelty of being Eurasian has helped me get to know people. Nearly everyone wants to know what an *ang moh* is doing in NS. I'm also the only one who didn't study at a local school. I attended Singapore American School, an international school under the American curriculum.

Aneirin and I stand out. Unexpectedly, this has been an advantage. The instructors have noticed us, and most of them like us.

### **BUT WE HARDLY KNEW YOU**

After just seven days, Batch 39 has already lost two men. One went out-of-course (OOC) because of sinusitis and flat feet. The other went OOC because he tripped while walking into the cookhouse and fractured his arm.

Our class's total strength has fallen to 98.

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**WEEK  
TWO**

## **SATURDAY, MARCH 16 - SUNDAY, MARCH 17**

Typically, we'll book out on Friday nights and book in on Sunday nights. However, the first two weeks of NS are the "confinement period," so we stayed in camp over the weekend.

Let the second week begin.

## **MONDAY, MARCH 18**

This week, Aneirin and I have volunteered to be ICs. I won't lie—I did this purely to increase my chances of going to Officer Cadet School.

There are always two class ICs. IC stands for In-Charge. These two poor dudes are tasked with running the class. The ICs rotate weekly.

This morning, our Platoon Commander, 2nd Warrant Officer (2WO) Foo, asked for two volunteers to be this week's ICs.

Last night, Aneirin and I had agreed to volunteer to be ICs together. Now, as Warrant Foo's question hung over us, I looked at Aneirin and froze, paralyzed by nervousness. I shook my head. Aneirin smiled, looked away, and raised his hand.

*Shit*, I thought. I raised my hand too.

Warrant Foo was surprised. "You two want to be ICs? Good," he said.

So, here we are.

The ICs are responsible for knowing the class head count and keeping the batch on schedule. As I'm starting to find out, this is harder than it sounds. Getting nearly a hundred dudes to behave and cooperate is a task worthy of a Greek tragedy. Even worse, the ICs get punished

for the class's mistakes. For instance, whenever the batch is late, Aneirin and I hold the push-up position until everyone arrives.

The ICs also give the drill commands. The commands are in Malay and must be delivered in a precise order. I've really been struggling with these. My pronunciation is terrible, and I can't get the accent right. A few times, instead of following my commands, the batch has just laughed at me. I'm taking each screw-up deeply. I want to succeed, but each time I say the wrong thing in front of the class, I tense up.

Aneirin is able to laugh off his mistakes. When he mispronounces something or forgets the command, he laughs and yells, "Shit!" Everyone laughs with him. When I mess up, I become serious, and everyone notices. I need to unearth the class's respect.

We had a stand-by bed this afternoon, conducted by Master Sergeant (MSG) Dennis, one of our Platoon Sergeants. Stand-by beds are area inspections. During the inspection, the batch stands at attention outside their cabins, and the instructors inspect the rooms. The class ICs follow the instructors around.

So far, stand-by beds are the worst part of military life. I can't stand them. In addition to the room being spotless, all of our belongings must be arranged in a precise way. We place our pillows over our blankets, have our towels folded at the edge of the bed, fold and place our number fours on the cabinet's top left shelf,

fold and place our PT shirts over our PT shorts next to our socks on the cabinet's bottom left shelf, place toothbrushes next to toothpaste next to razors next to cups on the cabinet's top right shelf, and lay our field packs and helmets on top of the cabinet. Everything else we own is jammed into our duffel bags, which are then stacked neatly in a corner. The cabinet arrangement leaves about 90% of the available space empty. As a result, our duffel bags are crammed 100% full of our shit.

Our standard in the stand-by bed was subpar. As ICs, Aneirin and I were held responsible. Master Dennis punished us, putting us through set after set of push-ups and jumping jacks while the rest of the batch watched.

I earned some much-needed respect for that. I felt it evaporate that night, though, when Aneirin told me, "Everyone says you should chill out a bit."

I don't think I've been overly hard on the class. Yes, I yell when they're unresponsive, but only after asking nicely hasn't worked. I haven't figured out how to simultaneously be nice to the class and get them to listen. When we're unsupervised, everyone just wants to mess around, and it takes forever to get their attention. Perhaps I should be more lenient. But I'm just doing my best to keep us on time and prevent us from getting punished.

I almost always feel unsure of myself. My old insecurities are creeping back in.

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## THE PERKS

Being IC can be rewarding, though. There's the pre-eating chant, for instance.

During meals, we always wait for everyone to collect their food and then start eating together. Every man stands behind his chair, food untouched, until everyone but the ICs have gotten their plates. This usually takes about 15 minutes. By now, having stared at the food in front of them for a quarter of an hour, everyone's twitching with hunger.

When the ICs finally have platefuls, they stand before the class and shout, "Ready?" The class roars back, "READY!" The ICs continue, "Our core values!" The class hollers the Naval Diving Unit's three core values: "HONOR, INTEGRITY, TEAM SPIRIT!"

The ICs yell, "Eat up!" The class echoes the call and everyone can eat at last. This is always the most full-bodied cheer of the day.

Overall, I'm getting along well with the class, though being IC has altered some friendships. It's a different relationship dynamic, as now they have to listen to me. I also believe my struggles, especially with the drill commands, have caused some to doubt my leadership. I guess I'll have to change their minds.

## NAVY TALK

The Navy has a unique vernacular. When we say a number, we say its individual digits. So, when people

say "Batch 39," they don't say "thirty-nine." They say "three-nine."

Our bunks are "cabins."

Toilets are "heads."

To fall in is to "muster." We do this in rows of three.

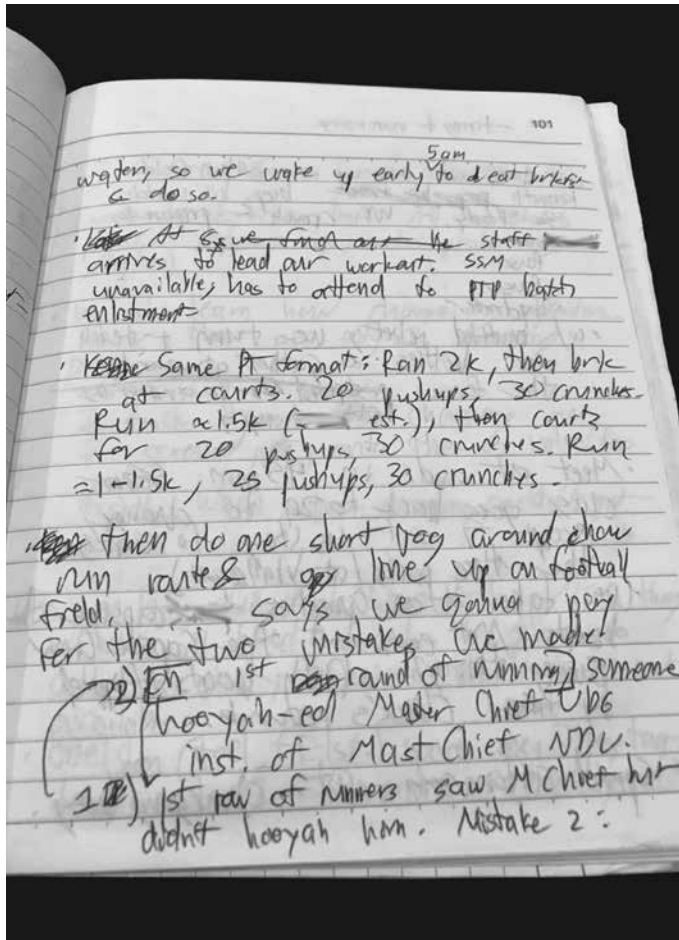
Physical activities and exercises are "evolutions."

Naval divers are known as "frogmen." Just inside the NDU gate is a statue captioned "Frogman from the Sea." The frogman holds a trident in one hand and a bomb in the other. It has one foot in the sea and one foot on land. Right now, we aren't frogmen. We're tadpoles.

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

One week has passed. Life in NDU hasn't been what I expected. NDU has a reputation for intense training; I pictured muscle-crushing workouts and mind-melting runs. Instead, in the first week, we've only had one physical training (PT) session and two swimming lessons. There's been lots of administrative work and in-processing. We received our uniforms and equipment. We were assigned bunks. We've endured talks from an endless flow of people, from instructors to insurance salesmen.

I'm still waiting for the pain to begin.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max West was born and raised in Singapore, where he attended the Singapore American School. He performed his National Service in the Naval Diving Unit of the Republic of Singapore Navy. He is currently an undergraduate at Princeton University, where he studies English and creative writing.