

A tale of woe and misgivings

National service trainee PLAIN JANE is back after some sick leave, only to find that life is indeed tough when it comes to character-building.

I THINK I've finally had enough! I've had a bad cough from the time we were at the Kuala Kubu Baru (KKB) camp which only got worse after I got to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), most probably because I had to run in the rain twice despite having gone to the doctors twice in KKB and once in UPM.

It got so bad that my throat got really irritated and I started coughing blood. So last Thursday night I decided to call my parents to come and get me. I figured the only way I'd ever get better was if I went home and got some much-needed rest. I dreaded coughing for another month. Worse still, my room-mates were starting to get sick as well.

Going home was definitely a sweet experience. I got the rest I needed, went to the doctor and even had time for some shopping. I came back on Sunday and felt much better and refreshed. However, it didn't last long. The very next day, I got caught in the rain again. And again on Tuesday.

Even though our teachers were nice enough to let us off early on Tuesday, while running to the bus stop it started to pour. We had to wait a few minutes for the bus (as there are not enough buses), before getting on the air-conditioned bus.

Then we were dropped off in front of our college and had to run some more to our dorm which was quite far away.

So I wasn't surprised that I fell sick again the next day. In fact a lot of people weren't feeling well either. Some say the water from the water cooler was contaminated. Because I wasn't well, I didn't go to class on Wednesday. Neither did my roommate, who had a fever.

That afternoon there was a spot check. We were sleeping when the facilitators used the master key to open all the doors and woke us up. They were kind of rude and scolded us because neither of us had an MC for that particular day. I tried to explain my situation,

saying that I did have a doctor's note which was at the headquarters, but I was told to go down anyway. So I did.

The paratroopers (soldiers from the army who are there to mete out discipline) punished us by making us exercise under the hot afternoon sun. None of us was excused unless we had a MC. It was really unfair, because a lot of girls were really sick but just didn't go to UPM's *Pusat Kesihatan* (Health Centre).

Those who did weren't given MCs and were still forced to exercise.

My friend tried to explain, but she was rudely told to shut up by one of the paratroopers. All in, about 60 girls were summoned, and because a few had skipped class on purpose, all of us were punished! They went on and on about how we were wasting the Government's money, and though I could understand everything they were trying to say, I was mad at the way they were treating us. They just wouldn't listen to reason.

Sometimes national service really feels like being in jail, because we are treated like prisoners. The paratroopers watch our every move and we are not allowed to leave or go out. Worse still, they scolded us even though we were sick. Some girls started to cry, and the facilitators sympathised with them.

Those who skipped class on purpose said it's boring (which is true); furthermore they were not in the mood, since they split up all our platoons. And because the new timetable is so hectic, there's been a lot of tension.

Often we have to skip lunch because there isn't enough time to use the bathroom (as our doom is far away and my company is five floors up), freshen up, pray (for the Malays) and come down half an hour early to catch the bus.

As for the classes (we are now doing the character-building module), it's like kindergarten. We have a play box to keep our activity books and magic markers. Even the games we play aren't appealing to 18-year-olds; they are somewhat childish.

Mostly everyone is unhappy that we are given new groups and our platoons are split up. Sure, I'm all for making new friends, but my platoon has been like my family here and it's weird because I've gotten so used to seeing them everyday for the last two months.

If next week is any worse, I don't know what I'll do!



NEW RECRUITS: Second batch national service trainees picking up their uniforms and shoes after registration at Kem Sri Impian in Sungai Bakap, Penang.