

# From Military to Motorcycles: Isaac Phang Speeds into Adulthood

By Zoe Li | April 11th, 2023

On a typical Sunday afternoon, as the sun continued to spread its yellows and purples across the Pacific Highway, a rag-tag bunch of boys - no, I should really say men - clad in leather gear and vibrant helmets sped across the scorching tar road. They're all friends - as he would say, in a horrid attempt at an Australian accent, "Strayan biking mates" - from different parts of Sydney, orchestrating a group motorcycling session to explore scenic parts of New South Wales.

The motorcyclist riding at the front, boasting a sleek teal Yamaha YZF-R3 and rocking a metallic blue helmet, was Isaac Phang; a

22-year-old Singaporean international student, currently completing his third year studies at the University of Sydney (USYD). Now, the pearly blues on his bike were unparalleled to those he spent under the Singaporean military skies, nor did they rival the bright city lights of Hong Kong, but with each passing rotation of the spokes, it made him realise that he was still that very same doe-eyed boy from long ago, but now surrounded with people who share his passion.



*Phang sporting his Yamaha YZF-R3, Phang, 2020*

Phang invited me to his humble Chippendale apartment a couple of days ago, and I must admit, it's quite quaint for a man who takes pride in his speed. There weren't any 'glory day' photos or mini motorcycle models, or any food in the kitchen for that matter; just a few empty Amazon boxes scattered around. I was also expecting Phang to wear his usual leather jacket - to appear suave and well-kempt like most motorcyclists do - but to my surprise, he was rocking a tattered USYD hoodie. He let out a hearty guffaw at my awe; "I mean, what were you expecting? I'm still just a uni guy living alone!"

His laughter halted abruptly and his tone became rather intense; it was such a fast switch, I almost had whiplash. "It's ok if I don't name people explicitly right?" Privacy was a huge part of Phang's upbringing; from the high-ranking individuals in the military to the riders who he drove with in the city streets, respecting people's anonymity was of the utmost importance.

Growing up in the heart of Singapore, Phang was a relatively reserved child, often getting excluded by his peers. Due to his withdrawn personality, he was often picked on, resorting to spending his time ogling the motorcycles and cars that drove past rather than interacting with other kids; middle-aged men would drive Kawasakis and only teenagers would speed on Suzukis. Phang memorised it all.

The time between high school and his enlistment went by much like a speeding vehicle; fast, loud, and easily forgettable. Phang was delegated a very important role in the military, though his exact position was still confined to his NDA; "think of the most generic HQ setting in an action movie and that's just about what I did." He still had a supervisor - Major S, also known as "Boss". I joked and said it was like he worked at a Marvel movie-esque headquarters where they dispatched all our well-loved superheroes, with Major S being the guy at the top.

“Hah! Did you think I worked for Nick Fury?”

An unlikely friendship of sorts was formed with Major S. During his military service, Major S acted as his driving instructor for Phang, teaching him how to operate a manual car. “It was Boss who recommended my very first car - the Nissan R35 GT-R.” Phang rambled about the kinds of cars Major S owned, showing me photos upon photos of very expensive-looking automobiles. His enthusiasm oozed as he told me the most intricate of details of each car. Even when I tried questioning him further about his service, it would somehow always come back to Major S and his expertise in Japanese racing cars.

Though Major S was his idol, in no sense was he not strict. “Training was the worst,” he leaned back as his voice became a soft murmur, “but it was alright ‘cuz we had each other.” It was Phang’s first taste of not only camaraderie, but true friendship; something he yearned for so dearly in the past and had now grown addicted to. Everyone serving was viewed as an equal on the grounds, and he preferred it that way.

After serving two years in the Singaporean military, 18-year-old Phang was renewed. Now desiring a new chapter of his life before university abroad, he stumbled upon the bustling city of Hong Kong .

Hong Kong nights for a fresh-out-of-military teenager has got to be the wildest place to be. Finally leaving a strict regime, he was ready for a change. Phang joined a Supercar group where members would organise regular night drives. Contrary to the principles of military discipline, he often engaged in reckless behaviour; “I just kinda let loose!” I asked if he partook

in street racing, like the activities shown in the Fast and Furious franchise. Phang avoided commenting, saying he did “nothing illegal, just things that were mildly dangerous.”

I could've sworn I saw a wink afterwards.

This driving group expanded his scope of friendships; from construction workers to head judges, he could interact with people that were usually out of reach. To Phang, it was similar to the military; everyone was once again seen as an equal, no matter what lives they led.

So when he moved to Sydney for his studies, he wanted to replicate the same environment he thrived in. Phang acquired his Australian motorcycle license, and inspired by his military experience and his Hong Kong Supercar club, he started his own motorcycling group. Now no longer in his teens and finally departing from his phase of frivolity, Phang simply wants to focus on exploring the natural landscapes of NSW. Nonetheless, he remembers his journey fondly, grateful for the wild experiences that shaped his current self - because now, he can confidently share his passion with those around him.

“From military to motorcycles - I wouldn't have it any other way.”