DDE PRESENTS

LIFE IN THE NDA

-BY COL. Mir Ahmed Shah



I joined the National Defence Academy in July 1968. After clearing the Services Selection Board in May that year, I eagerly awaited the results which would come out in the national dailies. And sure enough, when they did, I was thrilled beyond words to see my name in print! A thick brown envelope followed by post soon enough, giving instructions regarding clothes, money, shoes and everything else as well as how to get there! My first impression of the Army was a good one- everything is cut and dried, just follow instructions!

In 1968, I was studying in Class XII in Sainik School Rewa. On getting through NDA, my first thought was- thank God! I won't have to slog for the ISC exam slated to be held in November that year! But in retrospect, I wish that I had been able to complete my ISC and even study further before becoming a fauji! For now, technically speaking, my educational qualifications remains - "10th class pass and Intermediate ex- NDA! For the world at large, I am uneducated!

At the NDA, I was assigned to *Juliet Squadron*. I found that three of my class-mates from Sainik School Rewa - Dushyant Chauhan, Suresh (Specky) Nair and Azad Singh were also in the same squadron. Life as a first-termer was tough. You were either front-rolling in the corridor or doing push-ups in the Drill Square in front of the Squadron! And of course, there was a culture shock awaiting us when we went in for our first bath-everyone has a bath in the nude in NDA! (Rather embarrassing, you know, especially if you have a crooked "you know what!" like Ashok Kumar Dhuri). My Roll Number which remains glued to my memory even today was 8081. (If I remember correctly, Dushyant was 8076 and Anil Kaul was 8082). The Squadron Cadet Captain was Tejinder Singh, a tall, impressive Sikh and the Cadet Sergeant Major was VBS Negi, a short, pugnacious boxer! The DCCs (Division Cadet Captains) were Rakesh Sharma (the one and only Indian Cosmonaut), SS Gill (God bless his Soul, he died due to shrapnel wounds in the 1971 was, he was in the Royal Deccan Horse) and the happy-go-lucky Barbora. Smiley Sukhdev was the CQMS. There were 24 of us first-termers in Juliet Squadron to include Haldar and Gypsy Chowdhury who were relegated types. The other poor, scared, blighters in 40th Juliet besides me were Banjo, Jugu Sethi, NKS Yadav, Anil Kaul, Anil Mago, Sreekumar, Shanks, Bikki, Randy, Gandyok, Mallu, Bhavnani, Ashok Kumar (Dhuri), Sethi, Buzwar, Swapan Mukherjee, Dushyant, Azad (from Rotack!), Spectropo Suresh, Randhir Chadha and Raghubir.

Its amazing how first-termers get "bull-shitted" in NDA! Let me recount a few of the ingenuous ways by which a guy can get sorted out. "What's my name?" asks a second-termer covering his nameplate. "You don't know MY name?" exclaims the President of the United States when you look back at him blankly. And then he roars-"Get bloody front rolling! "The reason I have a strong flexible back to this day is because I have measured the corridors of the first, second and third floors of Juliet Squadron umpteen times. And worse is to follow. Not satisfied with making me sweat, Mr Bill Clinton tells me to write down his name a thousand times and show it to him the next morning by muster. I will never forget the names of guys like GPS Chowdhury, Rakesh Berry and GG Dwivedi till my dying day! Another favorite one was- " What does KLPD stand for?" And if you don't know, its PT Rig at 1400 hrs in front of his cabin. Not only KLPD, I learnt many, many things and very, very quickly too! Like, for example, which are the Quartermaster's b***s and where are Hema Malini's t**s!

Seventh Heaven. The guys in Juliet Squadron NDA in Autumn Term 1968 could well teach a thing or two to the infamous UP Police! Let me elaborate. We first termers were told to climb to the "Seventh Heaven" as punishment, a real killer! This was the seventh wire of the grill above the door and we were supposed to hang on it using our fingers! Especially for me, this was pure torture as I happen to be rather heavy! And if you think that it is not possible to do a backroll up the stairs, think again, because I have done it at the behest of some joker of a second or third termer! But look at the brighter side- during the next PT period I did a demo back-roll on the mat as it seemed like child's play!

Haircut. I don't know if they still insist on it, but in our time we were given a "topi-cut."By this I mean that when you put on your beret, there should be no hair visible! And a haircut was to be taken every week without fail. If a Monday arrived without a cadet having taken one then woe betide him! The raw meat-eating Drill Ustaads would eat us for lunch! The erring cadet would be marched up to his Divo in the breakfast break that very morning and the least "Prasad" he could expect was 5 x Extra Drills. I still vividly remember that rather than go through the agony mentioned above I would go through the one-in-a lifetime experience of shaving the hair on the back of my head with my shaving razor on a Monday morning when I had slipped up. If there was one instance when I envied my Khalsa course-mates, this was it!

The Periphery . This is a beautiful metalled road that runs to the north of the Academy through hills and dale. Before long, we youngsters knew every yard of this road! And if we were destined to do a longer run, well then, the famous 2475 was just a little further ahead of the Periphery. I love hills but if there is one hill for which I don't have the slightest affection it is 2475!

Double-Outdoors . We had three periods before breakfast and five after, till lunch-time. More often than not, two of the three morning periods were PT and Drill and if they were one after the other, we had a job on our hands! PT - Drill was infinitely worse than Drill - PT because changing from a dirty sweaty PT rig to starched KDs (our khaki shirt and shorts) and putting on stockings, boots, and anklets and racing to the Drill Square on our bikes all within 15 minutes was quite an ordeal. Also, after a double-outdoor, one definitely needed a thorough bath with hot, steaming water. No, please don't think I don't like to bathe. Its just that a good bath takes fifteen minutes and every minute of the Breakfast-break was precious!

Flat. But God is just! Like He gave us Sabbath after six working days, so also He decided that after a couple of double-outdoors, every Course deserved a flat! On a flat, we started our mornings in our KDs, had about 45 minutes to eat our breakfast and by George, did we gorge? I'll say yes. So much so that it was difficult to stay awake in the post-breakfast periods. Though some will bet that shut-eye came easier after double-outdoors! Talking of sleeping in the post-breakfast periods, how can I forget to mention Rooms No 99 and 100! These are huge, deep classrooms in Sudan Block on the top floor, away from prying eyes and absolutely ideal for a snooze during Library periods! Many were the lovely 40 minutes of forenoon that I spent in those rooms in well-deserved rest and recuperation! Of course, I must confess, that when I was an appointment in my sixth term and in a surly mood, I knew exactly where to catch erring youngsters. How dare they sleep in class hours!

Swimming. Luckily for me, I had learnt how to swim way back in the days when I was in Class V in La Martiniere College, Lucknow. So swimming a length of the pool and jumping from the 7 metre board was no big deal for me when crunch-time came. But the poor blighters who were non-swimmers had a rough time, and when I say rough I mean ROUGH. Right from threats of relegation to no mid-term break to extra swimming classes, the poor chaps had it all. And the 7 metre board was a spectacle of mirth and merriment for us swimmers, watching the fun from afar! At times, our PTO, Major Darshan Singh (later Brigadier) would personally climb the 7 metre board and box the poor blighters who refused to jump! I have personally seen the most acrobatic feat by a cadet who after being pushed off a 7 metre board did some sort of a somersault mid-air and managed to hang onto the board! The guy will easily get a job in a circus! Sorry folks, he is a Major- General in the Army today, so no names! But I bet he must still be having nightmares today. As for me, it was a regular routine to carry my swimming trunks and towel to the Mess every Sunday morning. After a hearty breakfast, I would cycle down to the Swimming Pool and spend the fore-noon in the luxury of the cool, blue water, swimming length after length of breast-stroke!

The Drill Square. It was much later in life that I realized the full import of that Drill Square in NDA. That was the place where we learnt what discipline is, to blindly obey what we were commanded to do. If your squad instructor gives a command- " Dahine Mur!" you just jolly well do ‘dahine mur' without asking any questions! Some may argue otherwise but I am of the firm opinion that "Drill is the bedrock of Discipline! Maybe that is why I soon became the blue-eyed boy of the Drill ustaads because when they ordered us to march faster, then that is just what I did (much to the consternation of my course-mates). I have yet to comprehend why our Drill NCOs used to call it "changing march" My KD shirt would be dark with sweat after every Drill period and I became the butt of many a joke and was nick-named "OG Shah". OG stands for Olive Green, a title given to those who toe the line, do what they are told to do. In retrospect, I think that that was the most important thing I learnt in the NDA- to do the CORRECT thing, something that I will always cherish.

The Drill Square Test was held towards the end of my first term, a test to check our proficiency in Drill. I was one of the very few cadets of our course to pass the test in the very first attempt, allowing me the honour of putting on my lanyard while those of us who couldn't had to carry on putting on the arm-band!

Fort Singarh. This is a beautiful fort visible on the sky-line from NDA. A nice place for a pic-nic, you would think, imagining a lazy afternoon and lots of fun. Nothing could be further from the truth! A devious mind converted a trip to this magnificient fort from a pleasurable affair to a rape of the highest order! An act of indiscipline in the Academy could prompt a Divo to bark at the erring individual-" 5 x Singarh Hikes!" Besides the tremendous physical exertion in climbing up to Singarh, collecting a token and immediately heading back to the Academy-all within a stipulated time frame, what was most devastating was that these hikes were planned on Sundays! If on a Sunday late afternoon you saw a dejected, tired and sweating cadet in FSMO you knew exactly where he had been that day. No thank you, I don't want to see Singarh again-I've seen enough of it! Yes, but there was always a silver lining to those dark clouds. There was an unwritten law, at least in Juliet Sqn, that the Sunday morning tea eats were the property of the poor blighted Singarh hikers! So whenever I did Singarh, there was a packet of Marie biscuits in each of my FSMO pouches and you won't believe it when I tell you that I had downed them even before the climb started somewhere near IAT Pune!

Boxing. Whether you liked it or not, you have to box in NDA-or get boxed! In something called "novices boxing" two poor blighted first-termers were put into a boxing ring and let loose on each other-with a stern warning that in case they did not do justice to this infernal sport, then the PT ustaads would come into the ring to show them how! So it was a devil's choice for the poor buggars who rightly decided that they might as well swing their arms at each other and get done with it! I still remember how those three minutes in the ring seemed like three hours! But in all fairness I must admit, that there is no better way of getting to know if a guy is a sissy or otherwise. Then there were guys who just kept their gloved hands in front of their faces waiting to see what would happen! One solid punch to the nose would change their placid Gandhi outlook on life and it was pure fun to see how they changed their outlook from "defensive" to "offensive"! But one thing was common to all bouts-each contestant embraced the other warmly after the result was announced, in all probability due to relief that the agony was finally over.

But novices boxing wasn't the last I saw of those gloves. To my utter horror, I realized that by current standards, I was categorized as a good boxer and expected to fight as part of the Squadron Boxing team in the Inter-Squadron Boxing Championship held every alternate term! And fight I did and pretty well too, reaching the finals in my fourth term- Dimpy Bhardwaj and I bloodied each other quite royally in that fight. And even though I lost the fight, my "OLQ" (Officer Like Qualities) notched higher in the bargain! In my second term, I was made to fight a Ghanian Naval Direct called Dennis in his Novices Boxing. My heart wasn't in it, because I had been forced into this (there weren't too many boxers in the higher weight category). Anyhow, I got knocked out by Dennis and the moment the referee had counted up to ten, I got up and walked out of the ring! Very indiscreet, you would say, and I agree with you. My poor OLQ graph plunged in a southerly direction! But wait-the story has a happy ending. Two terms later, another Naval Direct from Ghana, by name of Dotsey joined the Academy and once again, yours truly, Bobby Shah, was told to meet him in his Novices Boxing. My cup of woes grew bigger and bigger when I learnt that he had knocked out Dennis, my old opponent, in Ghana! Anyway, this time I was mentally prepared and I managed to last out those three terrible minutes in the ring with old Dotsey, giving him as good as I got. I lost the bout but the way I was congratulated by one and all including Major SK Sharma, my Squadron Commander made it definitely worth the while. I presume that my OLQ graph may have got a new lease of life and moved northwards because I was awarded a trophy called "Best Progressive OLQ" in my sixth term!

Gole Market. Coming to the Gole Market was like a breath of fresh air, as if we had been transported back to civilization from Kaala Pani. Apart from shoe-polish and brasso, one could get delicious chikki and other eats in this market. In the junior terms it was possible to visit Gole Market only on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays and that too in our "walking-outs" whereas the fifth and sixth termers went whenever they felt like in whatever dress code they felt comfortable! Thus by unwritten law or tradition or whatever else you may call it, we learnt that perks and privileges come with seniority and a senior is a senior and a junior is a junior! To this day, I address an officer of the 39th NDA Course as "Sir" even though he may have been superseded or retired and the same is true of every young man who has passed out from the portals of this wonderful institution.

Cabin Cupboards. What a misleading name for a cabin inspection! For that is what it was. Every item of clothing, equipment, shoes and other paraphernalia in the cabin had to be in its proper place to the last

millimeter and sparkling clean. Every item of clothing in the cupboard had to have a measured piece of cardboard stuck in it to give it a correct rectangular shape, box to be in line with the edge of the bed, kit-bag in the corner of the room. I can never forget my very first cabin cupboard-taken by CSM VB Negi of the 35th Course. As I stood at attention outside my cabin, reasonably sure that the Cadet Sergeant Major would be quite satisfied with the state my cabin was in, Negi glared at me as he walked in. He rubbed his index finger on the underside of the study-table and then wiped the dust-covered finger on my nose, if you please! "This is your bloody standard for the CSM's cabin cupboard!"he roared. I realized then and there that a lot more effort was required to be put in by me for him to be satisfied. When I see the mess made by my two sons, Meraj and Faraaz in their untidy rooms, I wish that they could have been put through one of Negi's cabin cupboards!

Time just flew by in the NDA. We would keep track of the days by an abbreviation -"DLTGH" (Days left to go Home). Before I knew it I was a second termer and it was my turn to bullshit the new entrants. But being a soft-hearted chap I really didn't trouble the youngsters too much. And neither did I ask anybody my name! Though I distinctly remember one incident. I asked a first-termer- " You- yes, I'm speaking to you, you ass, do you know what a PONDY is?" The poor chap replied-"Yes Sir, He's the ACA!" I couldn't help but burst out laughing at the ACA, VKS Pundir of the 36th Course being called a pondy! Though, mind you, I didn't dislike the idea at all because VKS Pundir was a big sadist and he really turned the Academy upside down. Gypsy Chowdhury, who had been relegated and had joined our Course now turned his attention and bull-shitting skills towards the new freshers, 41st Juliet! I can never forget the following spectacle-Gypsy, all of five feet nothing, hanging on to the collar of Ganguly, 41st Juliet, some 6 feet 2 inches tall, standing like a rock and looking down his nose at Gypsy! "You bloody chap! Who do you think you are? Hanuman?" roared Gypsy. "No Sir, I am Cadet Ganguly," murmured the giant.

Upside Down. Yes when I say that VKS Pundir turned the Academy upside down, I mean just that! Every ACA of the Academy, (and there used to be just one every term, thank you God) used to feel that when the discipline of the Academy was not up to the mark, he knew what to do. Once the Sunday movie in the auditorium was over he would order the whole Academy, less the sixth-termers, his course-mates, to front-roll to the Mess for dinner! And front-roll we did, with fifth-term sergeants urging us to "roll faster" with Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachan or whoever it was who acted in the movie soon forgotten! Yes, I know what Sudan block looks like upside down! And the shortest route to the Mess from the Auditorium is via the Naval Training team, folks, don't I know it!

Camp Life. We second-termers were introduced to camp life in Camp Greenhorn. We were taught to pitch up bivouacs and tents and how to live neatly in Camp. Map reading was fun after I realized that contour lines did not represent tracks on the ground! It was nice eating in our enamel plates and drinking hot tea in our enamel mugs. At the campfire I whistled a song-"Aage bhi jaanen na tuu" with Ravi Khetarpal strumming the guitar and I won a prize for it! The last item of the Camp was the josh run from the camp site back to the Academy-it was the biggest test of stamina and endurance that I had experienced till then. Anyhow, I did it and even carried the stretcher for a large part of the run. The josh run ended near the PT gym and I drank almost four enamel mugfuls of nimbu-pani which was made freely available only to be violently sick and retching thereafter! But I was up and about soon enough, in time to receive my prize from the Commandant, Rear Admiral Batra.

NDA Bicycles. At the beginning of each term every cadet is issued with a bicycle which remains his personal property throughout that term. I can still remember that my bicycle in my first and second terms was J108. In order to ensure that it was not taken away by anybody else, I religiously used a chain and lock, like everybody else. But you can't use a lock and chain to keep the tyre valves intact! So, all of us had our GS Reserve of cycle valves! There was discipline while cycling too. Every cycle squad had a squad leader who would be in the lead, and the rest would follow in twos. When an officer passed by from the opposite side of the road, the squad leader would holler-"Saavdhaan Chal" and all cyclists in the squad would pull their arms. Once the 'danger' had passed, the rear-most cyclist would yell-"Vishraam Chal." And so on so forth! Our valiant steeds were really a boon. Without them we would never have been able to reach our outdoor and indoor classes in time, especially if we had a Weapon Training class or Equitation Periods. And God help us if we were caught cycling without being in a squad by an appointment or a Drill Ustaad - "Lift up your bloody bikes!" the order was barked out at us and then it was our bikes which were doing the riding!

Tant Policeman Bajri Order. I notice that you are looking a bit puzzled. What on earth, you are asking yourself is this animal called "Tant Policeman Bajri Order"! I shall enlighten you in a moment. "Tant" is a nickname for a guy from Maharashtra derived from a historical figure called Tantya Tope. (I don't know why, but calling a tant a tant always raised his hackles!) And bajri order is Chindit Order with lots of bajri in the big pack. So if you were unfortunate enough to be called in this rig, you would have to put on KD shorts, White Patrol jacket, Black Web Belt, Blue Patrol cap, riding patties and chappals! And then, of course, the bajri order on top of that! And if the senior who had called you in this rig was in a sour mood or wanted to have his fun you would be standing in the corridor directing traffic like the good policeman you were supposed to be, much to the amusement of fellow Juliets passing through!

Cross-Country. One big item on the agenda was the Inter-Squadron Cross-Country Competition which was held every term and which counted towards the Inter-Squadron Championship Banner. In our time, it was a 13 kilometre run starting from the Gliderdrome past the Lone Tree Hill and then over hill and dale till we could see the flags fluttering in the distance and the taped enclosures back in the Gliderdrome! And the hordes of gaily-coloured vests would make a dash for the finish point hoping to make it to the early enclosures! For some reason that I am unable to fathom till today is why they made us run in our riding boots! No matter how hard I tried, I could never do better than the fourth enclosure. I had an Ethiopian coursemate by the name of Tedros Mubazian who always came first and he would give such a solid lead to the rest of the Academy that just two or three guys came in the first enclosure, about fifteen or so in the second and then the hordes poured in. I remember that I tried so hard to better my performance in my fourth term cross-country run that I fainted about a kilometer short of the finish. Surendaran Damodaran, a fifth-termer of my Squadron, literally almost picked me up to get me over the finish line. Such was the Squadron spirit! This was what the NDA taught us- do or die for the unit you belong to. And it remains drilled in the mind of every young man worth his salt who has passed out from it. Damo became the Squadron Cadet Captain in his sixth term-an absolutely wonderful human being if I ever knew one. May his soul rest in peace-he died in an air crash a few years ago. I remember seeing his obituary in the morning papers and grieving over the same. Yes, how can I forget my final term cross country? The PTO, Major Darshan Singh told me (I was the ACA in my sixth term) to go out in front and control the unruly mob of

cadets stomping and cheering their teams, willing the race to get started. All of a sudden he put down the starters flag and I saw a mass of humanity charging towards me-I turned around and took off myself! I wish somebody could have taken my photo in that instant-Bobby Shah leading the Academy in the Cross Country Race! I would have got that photo enlarged and framed and fibbed my grandchildren about my prowess! Anyhow, I managed to maintain that lead for all of 5 seconds till the super runners whizzed past me! The best part of the story is that I came in the third enclosure that term.

The other reason why my sixth term cross country race comes back to mind is the unsolved mystery of Mush-behind- the-Bush! Let me explain. I have a course-mate called Sharma who sports a nice big moustache. To the best of our knowledge, he was no great shakes as a cross country runner. Yet when the race ended, we all were astounded to hear that old Sharma had come third in it! Rumor has it that the guy who was actually coming third suddenly saw someone erupt from a bush towards the end of the race in front of him! And it was further said by someone, whose name I forget, that Sharma wasn't even sweating at the end of the race! So that is it! Just like I am known as Bobby OG Shah to my course-mates, Sharma sports a new name since then-"Mush-behind- the-Bush".

Cadets' Mess. If there is one institution in the National Defence Academy which holds pride of place, it is the Cadets Mess. It is huge, yes HUGE! It houses tables for all Squadrons, is spick and span at all times, and has two side entrances besides the imposing main entrance. There is a big flight of steps leading up to the main entrance. Central Mess houses the VIP tables. Once a week we used to have Dinner Night in our Patrols, White or Blue, depending on the time of the year. The most astonishing quality about the Mess is its capability to cater for the voracious appetite of 1500 cadets all at one go, especially at breakfast time, with everyone wolfing down toast after toast with one eye on the clock! I never did manage to go down to see the kitchens, but I believe that they are state-of-the -art. They must be, to be able to have this capability.

Time just flew while we were at the NDA. Before I knew it, I was a third termer. I had the privilege of being appointed one of the first rotational lance corporals and I proudly stitched the tich buttons on all my uniforms and got myself photographed in Gole Market for good measure! Third term was supposed to be a cushy term and somehow we got many more flats than in the previous terms. Also, nobody really bothered us as there were plenty of first and second termers to bullshit. And of course, the more enterprising and "bull-shitter" types amongst us started having a field day with the youngsters. "What is your name, young man?" asks Azad Singh of a tall, lanky first termer. "Sir, UB Dahiya." "Why the hell should I be Dahiya?"retorts Azad. To which poor UB has no reply. Sergeant Sham Kumar of 38th Course suddenly decides that 40th Juliet is having a whale of a time. He announces at muster-"40th Course, PT Rig two o'clock in the Parade Ground!" At the appointed time, 40th Course Juliet Squadron is standing in the mid-day sun, tittering away. All of a sudden, Sham Kumar can be seen sauntering away in the distance. "Oy, chup ho jao, saala Sham Kumar aa raha hai" NKS Yadav warns the others. Unfortunately for him, NKS has a guttural voice, which carries for miles. "Yadav, on your hands down" says Sham Kumar from a mile away. By the end of the afternoon, we are sweating away to glory and our lunch has been thoroughly digested.

Physical Training. Whether we liked it or not, we became physically fit in NDA. There were PT tests which had to be cleared every term, like back roll, rope-climbing, wooden horse and dive-roll and God

knows what else, with the threat of relegation hanging over our heads like the Sword of Damocles. The PT periods were always 40 minutes of violent, sweaty exercise with Havildar Sardool Singh making sure that not a second was wasted! Also, with cross country being held every term, you jolly well learnt to run! And carrying your bicycle gives you good biceps-I'll vouch for that! Add swimming to the list, not to mention Drill and evening games. In Drill, Subedar Harphool Ram of the Rajputana Rifles and Havaldar Nafe Singh had us by the short hairs! And cycling at full speed to get to Sudan Block or Science Block or wherever on time during class hours-the mixture was too rich! No wonder then that we slept like logs when our heads hit the pillow at "Lights Out, Juliet Squadron"at 10 p.m. every night to be woken up by the clarion call of a first-termer at 5 a.m. the next morning-"Tea is ready, Juliet Squadron."

Subedar Major Kanshi Ram. If there was one figure in NDA who can never be forgotten by cadets who were in the Academy during 1968 to 1971, it was Subedar Major Kanshi Ram. The man was an institution by himself. He was a tall, handsome JCO of the Dogra Regiment with piercing eyes and a voice like a foghorn. When the cadets saw him standing at a vantage point shaking his cane at the world in general their marching standard improved and the cycle squads got into proper dressing. He hated cadets going late for classes after the breakfast break and would invariably catch a few stragglers. "Sahab, humko CSM ne rok liya tha" one cadet lamented when told to lift up his cycle by the SM. Kanshi's favourite retort was-CSM? Who the bloody he? I the bloody hoo! I remember one more incident about this disciplinarian. Once during Academy Drill, Kanshi saw a Drill Ustaad checking the tightness of a cadet's belt. He hollered from one end of the Drill Square-" Saab, cadet ka belt mat check karo!" We had just begun to think that old Kanshi was going soft when our misapprehensions were dispelled by him-"Usko kick maro!" I saw much more of this man during my sixth term and was amazed by his immaculate turn-out and his beautifully clipped moustache! I wish I had a photograph of him.

Foreign Language versus Latin Hungarian. We were made to sit for a Minimum Hindi test in our second or third terms, I forget which. Those of us who cleared the test were given a choice of foreign languages to study while those who flunked it had to continue studying "Latin Hungarian"(Lower Hindi). I cleared the test and opted for Persian as the script was the same as Urdu, my mother tongue. Mr Mahmood Alam was our Persian teacher and I scored pretty well in my exams.

We were taught so many subjects in NDA that I lose count. Let me remember-there was Engineering Drawing, Welding, Foundry and much more over and above our academic and Service subjects. We worked at lathes too! I remember that I became pretty good at welding after I used a light hand to hold the welding torch! My favorite subject was Military History-Mr Bhandari, a tall gentleman, took our classes in this subject and by the time that he finished teaching us about the North African campaign, we all had become fans of that great German general, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel. Geography was boring and most of us fell asleep during Mr Siddiqui's classes!

Clothes that Stand. You must be wondering that this guy has got it all wrong-what the hell, how can clothes stand? Yes, they can, and let me tell you how! Our khaki KD shorts were starched and pressed so many times that they could stand! During the breakfast break, the orderlies used to sit around in the corridor and "pull" our KD shirts through these very shorts so that we looked nice and smart! And then we would march to the Mess, those very KD shorts pointing forward!

Relegated Types. The moment a guy got relegated, he became a "Dada". He had the best of both worlds! Gypsy Chowdhury was relegated from 39th to 40th Course-so when 40th Course was called in PT Rig by an appointment, Gypsy very conveniently belonged to 39th Course and when 39th Course created some gaddar, of course, Gypsy was 40th Course! The once relegated types were known as "Brigadiers" and the twice-relegated superheroes were "Generals"! If the top shirt button of a guy was open, well, in all probability, he was a Brigadier or a General! Looking back in retrospect, relegation was really a terrible punishment and for such stupid reasons-Anil Kaul got relegated for smoking, somebody else for going on a ganna-raid. I strongly feel that the authorities must never relegate a cadet except for the most serious lapses. As an officer, one gets 6 months loss of seniority after being found guilty of a serious offence by a court-martial, but as a cadet, you can get relegated at the drop of a hat! How did that hat drop? XYZ was unable to jump over that bally wooden horse with his legs straight out, so he gets relegated! How utterly ridiculous! This was the only thing that really got my gout in NDA- I really feel very strongly that relegation for a cadet is a most abominable punishment, except for the strongest reasons.

Before we knew it, we were 4th termers! This term was a very important one as a Board exam was held and our final term appointments would depend on the result. So we really slogged during this term on our studies and made sure that our PT tests were cleared on time. And towards the end of term, we had Camp TORNA, a real slog of a camp. I remember that Squadron Cadet Captain Sham Kumar and Divisional Cadet Captain Haralu of Juliet Squadron, both of 38th Course, visited our camp-site for the camp-fire and took a photo-session with us.

Pith Hat on Sudan Block! One of our low-profile course-mates in Juliet Squadron was Sreekumar. He was a naval type and I have never set eyes on him ever since we passed out of the Academy. I remember him as a cheerful type with a toothy grin as wide as that of a Cheshire cat! Old Sreekumar threatened one day that he would put a pith hat on top of Sudan Block. We thought that he was joking and never took him seriously. But the next morning, we were astounded to see a pith-hat hanging from the flag-pole atop the Sudan Block! Well done Sree, wherever you are! I just don't know how the hell you managed to do a feat like that! And get in touch, old chap!

And then, what do you know, we were fifth-termers! Dushyant and I both became sergeants, and I don't remember who the third was. Being a bull-shitter type, Dushyant had a field day with the juniors whereas I stayed within limits! Shujan Gopal Chatterjee became the 39th Course ACA and so we sergeants had to go to him in rotation for orders every afternoon. These orders were further disseminated to the Squadron in the evening in a parade called the Ante-Room Procedure. After Ante-Room, the Squadron would fall-in and march to the Mess for dinner. The Squadron Cadet Captain would get a chance to practice his words of command and the CSM would ensure that everyone was marching up! The final halt at the No.3 Battalion side entrance of the Mess by the Squadron was an indicator of the morale of the boys! More often than not, the morale of Juliet Squadron was sky-high!

Juliet Squadron Officers. Our Divos in Juliet were Capt Shivde, Lt(IN) Chandy and Flt Lt Uberoi. Shivde was a bull-shitter of the highest order but he had a soft corner for me as we played tennis together often on the grass courts. INS Chandy was so fat that it seemed he would burst at any moment! Uberoi was a dope and we called him 007 and a half - (licensed to dope!). Yes, there was Capt Nag, the smartest and best of the lot. Later, he got promoted and became our "Squaddie" towards our sixth term... Major SK Sharma

was our Squaddie for the most part of our six terms. Major SK retired as an Army Commander! We hardly ever saw our officers-our squadron appointments were our mothers and fathers! Yes, we did come across them at Dinner Nights. I remember that old Chandy used to always have a huge helping of pudding and then would express-"Oh, my gosh, I didn't realize how much I have taken!" But this happened far too often for it to be true! If ever a cadet was called to the Squadron Office, it meant trouble for the poor blighter! Either he had been called for getting Extra Drills or Restrictions from his Divo, or to get a moral lecture as his marks in Academics were very poor, or to be told that he jolly well pull up his socks as far as his PT Tests were concerned!

Ronnie Periera. Yes, I am talking about the one and only Admiral Ronnie Periera, our Deputy Commandant in NDA during our fifth and sixth terms, who later became the Chief of Naval Staff! May God bless his soul. A man who can never be forgotten by us, or for that matter, by anyone who ever came in contact with him. Ronnie "galvanized" the Academy the moment he joined (if galvanized is the word I want). The National Defence Academy revolved around this man, all else was forgotten. He was always looking to improve the working conditions and the morale of the boys, whether by getting after the Catering Officer to improve our food or by seeing to it that the Squadron Lines had everything to make our lives comfortable. He was the one who got fans put in every cabin. We could expect to see a tall man in Navy whites with a roaring voice at any time, any place-whether it was muster, PT, Drill, classes or at the various sports disciplines. And if the Deputy Commandant was omnipresent, well, you can imagine that the poor Divos and Squaddies were with us almost 24 hours! And Ronnie could be tough. During our sixth term, he felt that the discipline of 40th Course was not up to the mark so instead of letting us go home in the mid-term break he sent us on long route-marches which really had us! (On one of these marches I realized that Philip Mathai and I have the same marching speed so we had a great time walking together, cracking jokes and generally cribbing about life in general.)

Inter-Squadron Games and Sports. In the major troop games such as football, hockey, basketball and volleyball each Squadron had to field six strings in the Inter-Squadron Competition! So, whether you liked it or not, you were in some string team or other! I remember that I would land up playing for the fifth string teams in most sports while Dushyant, a born sportsman, would be in the first string teams. (But then I had Boxing, Tennis and Battalion Boat Pulling on my dossier which he didn't!) I remember that Juliet won the first string football finals in our third term, kind courtesy a great lone goal by Haralu, our ace centre-forward. I have a photograph of the entire Squadron standing and cheering with the football trophy. That evening during Study Period, the entire Squadron went around the Academy clanging mugs and spoons and congregated on every Squadron parade ground. "Juliet Squadron ne Delta Squadron ki!" yelled the choir leader, Gypsy Chowdhury. And the rest of Juliet hollered-LeLi! And so on to the next Squadron and the next and the next, till we were exhausted and returned to Juliet Squadron. That evening, there were no punishments!

Inter Battalion Variety Entertainment Programme. This was an event held every term which I really relished. I would take part in a Quawwaali or as part of a group singing English music. Subedar, my course-mate, was the moving force in any Qawwaali and the rest of us were there just to sing along or clap (in style!) As far as English music was concerned, Gypsy was the boss-he sings beautifully and plays the

guitar too. Along with him were Ravi Khetarpal on the lead guitar, Gorkhindi and myself. I would whistle too and sing along with them. We sang numbers like-"Hey Jude" "Raindrops Keep Fallin on my Head" and I whistled the tune -"For a few dollars more." Anil Kaul was our master on stage in the plays which were staged. He always teamed up with some Officer's wife in the feminine role and we envied him for it! Rajan Oberoi of 41st Juliet was a "cheekoo" those days and once he was dressed up as a girl and looked so cute! We always took a lot of photos at the end of the final programme and these adorn my NDA albums.

End of Term Squadron Social. This was something that all juniors looked forward to. And something that few sixth-termers dreaded! Especially those who were callous in their bull-shitting and had the juniors for no rhyme or reason. The Social used to begin with an entertainment- cum-variety programme in which "sab ki pant utar di jati thi!" Even the Squadron officers were not spared except possibly, the Squaddie and everybody was mimicked and their idiosyncrasies and takya-kalaams brought out into the open, much to everybody's hilarity and amusement. And then, after tea and eats, the officers used to leave, and the real fun began! This was the one and only night when, by unwritten custom and tradition, the juniors could say and do anything to the passing-out Course! And so there were sixth-termers rolling, doing push-ups, or just doing the bidding of their juniors, those very youngsters who had been at their mercy throughout the previous terms! I remember that in my first term social CQMS Sukhwinder (or was he Sukhdev, I forget) told me - "Shah Sir, may I give you a ride?" Of course, I was thrilled and spent the next half an hour doing Equitation on the CQMS! Of course, the next morning, when equations were back to normal he bullshitted me- "You buggar, I never knew that you weigh a ton!" I remembered this in my own sixth-term social when it was my turn to get bashed up and bullshitted and took a light youngster, Nanda, of 45th Course for a long ride to avoid getting sorted out! I met Nanda ages later, a big man in his own right, commanding an Engineer Brigade and reminded him of that night! There was a guy from 39th Juliet who ran away after locking his cabin and we still talk about how cowardly the chap is!

Towards the end of my sixth term, Ranbir Singh and I were short-listed to become ACA during our sixth term and we had to go to see the SM and the Adjutant daily after classes. We saw hallowed places in the Sudan Block which we had never seen earlier and climbed up Central Lobby, a rare treat! I knew that I had an edge over Ranbir, as old Kanshi Ram was fond of me due to my being the Academy Right Marker and sure enough, soon I was told that I had been selected! It was a rare honour and a great privilege-to be selected as the Academy Cadet Adjutant of 40th Course NDA! Even today, I bump into officers of all the three Services of the 41st to 45th Courses who remember me as their ACA and it brings a lump of justified pride to my throat! So what if I have superannuated as a Colonel!

Sixth Term was good fun -it was bound to be, as we were the kings of the Academy! We had all the privileges and nobody to punish us! Of course, we appointments had all the responsibilities we could think of-ensuring the discipline of the juniors and seeing to it that the Squadron did well and got the Championship Banner. And we had to set a good example, so we had to swing up whenever we were marching (swinging all the way from the Science Block to the Mess can get rather tiring!). The two black stripes on my shoulders looked most impressive and I did my best to live upto them.

Towards the end of term we suddenly realized that life at the NDA was coming to an end and soon we would be in a different place and environment. Also, we realized that our dear friends and course-mates who were Airforce and Naval types would be going their different ways and we wouldn't be seeing them

again. It was a sobering thought and I realized that I would miss old Shanks, Gandyok, Mukho, Randhir, Mallu, Bhavnani and the others. Anyhow, at least we Army types would still be together at IMA, albeit in different Companies and Battalions-- - that was the silver lining to an otherwise dark cloud.

I bullshitted the Academy at one of the movies towards the end of my sixth term. Then, on an impulse, I let down my guard and smiled. And the Academy roared! After they had stopped yelling and cat-calling, I told them that the Juliet Squadron end of term social was coming up and that whoever had a grouse against the ACA could come and sort him out after the social! I am glad to inform you that nobody took up my offer-in all probability, they were busy sorting out their own CSMs! Luckily for all of us, all Squadron socials were held on the same evening.

Yes, I cannot possibly end my narrative of our sixth term without a word about Camp Chindits. It was an experience that I will never forget. To begin with, Dushyant and I teamed up to dig a two-man trench and we dug and dug till the wee hours of the morning! I think that that was the turning point in our lives and we decided that we were NOT going to join the Infantry! Another memorable event was the Episode of the Night Sentry-all of us were given our slots for night sentry duty, my turn being at 2 a.m. However, the guy on duty at 10p.m. slept off so the chain was broken and nobody gave duty that night. When the Squadron Commander inquired about it in the morning, everybody lied glibly, passing the parcel to the next chap in the chain... But when they reached 2a.m., yours truly, Bobby Shah, was unable to lie as glibly as the others! So Major SK gave it to me, nice and proper! I still remember the smug look on the faces of my course-mates, trying their best not to laugh when I was being had by the Squaddi! but my lips were sealed and I am proud to take credit for that.

Another event during Chindits was really hilarious! Major SK took us out on a night recce patrol. And guess who was detailed to be the Getaway Man? None other than Gypsy Chowdhury! During the patrol, Major SK told Gypsy that the patrol had been ambushed and that he should "getaway" and report the matter to Company Headquarters. Gypsy said Yes Sir, and vanished into the undergrowth. Anyway, the patrolling activity finished late at night, but there was no sign of Gypsy. Then when the debriefing was going on, a disheveled Gypsy Chowdhury erupted from the bushes, gave a smart salute to the Squaddie and said-" Sir! Hamara patrol ambush Hoenga!" All of us, including SK, burst out laughing! Gypsy may have been a blue in singing English numbers but he passed his Latin Hungarian tests with difficulty.

Before we knew it, it was June 1971 and it was time for 40th Course to pass out from the National Defence Academy. Papa came for the POP. Ravi Shankar, BCC of Number 1 Battalion was awarded the Gold Medal but I got the trophy for the Best Army Cadet as well as the trophy for the Best Progressive Officer Like Qualities. At the Guest Dinner Night, Papa sat next to the Commandant who told him that he wished there were two gold medals as he would have liked to give me one as well! Ronnie also met Papa very warmly when he came to know that he had served in the Royal British Navy from 1941 to 1944.

So that is my narrative about the three wonderful years of my life spent at the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla. A place where I learnt what life is, what duty is, what is right and what is wrong - in short, they were the most formative years of my life. The friends I made there are my friends for life. Today, when I have retired from the Army after completing over 34 years in Olive Greens, I still look back at those three years with nostalgic affection. The moment you meet an ex-NDA officer and tell him-"I'm 40th Juliet!" an instant bond forms between you and him, whether he is senior or decades junior.

May God bless NDA!

JAI HIND.

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