

Ode to a brave soldier

Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 18 March 2015 04:03

By Sidharth Mishra



Tucked away in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas is Dehradun, which was once an abode of retired Brown Sahibs and the home of leading boarding schools in the country. It has been 15 years since the state of Uttarakhand was created and these years have been sufficient to turn the quiet town into a bustling state capital. While those retiring from armed forces and other government services may no longer be moving into the Doon (the valley) of Dehra, the famous boarding schools have somewhat still managed to retain their aura. Dehradun town was once neatly divided into two halves by the Bindal River. The west side was exclusive to the cantonment and the forest department; and towards the east were the civil area and the bazaars. Today Bindal River has vanished with Bangladeshi immigrants having encroached upon its dried up bed, though the age old bridge still exists. Within the cantonment there are two huge estates -- the Chandbagh and Rajwara measuring 69 and 139 acres respectively.

On these estates were built two eminent institutions – the Doon School (Chandbagh) and the Prince of Wales' Royal Indian Military College (RIMC-Rajwara).

While the Doon School alumni became part of India's civilian elite as bureaucrats, politicians and captains of the industry, the RIMC kept its focus on producing military leaders. Both the schools have had their ups and downs but today's notebook is dedicated to the latter where your reporter had an experience of a lifetime last week.

For the past two decades I travel every year on March 12 and 13 to celebrate the Founder's Day of the school with its students, staff and other members of the alumni. When I started making the journey, I enjoyed a UFO-like status among the hardened soldiers, wondering how somebody who was trained to wield the rapier was pushing the pen to eke out a living. Slowly, reservation gave way to acceptance of me as a person but not necessarily of all my views.

I too wondered what kept taking me back to my school. I did not specialise in defence reporting, thus a reporter's quest for a story as motivation was ruled out. Since I did not serve in the armed forces or do not trade with them, the networking bit too was ruled out. I got my answer this year.

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Every March 13 morning at the Martyr's Memorial, a marble structure built at the main crossroad of the sprawling school campus, a function is held in the memory of those members of alumni who laid their life in defence of the country's and service's flag. This function is christened as the wreath laying ceremony. It's a small service attended over the years by presidents, governors, ministers, defence service commanders, school boarders, members of faculty and visiting old students with their families.

At this ritual a speech is never made. Smartly turned out students, who are called cadets; escort a chosen few to the memorial to lay the wreath on the behalf of the gathering. This is followed by long blowing of bugles twice; and during the break in between, one can only hear silence and chirping birds. Towards the end of the function one hears the roar of the rotors of arriving choppers, which carry out a fly past.

At the end of the function, I doubt if there is anyone without a lump in their throat. I first attended

this function in March 1979 as a 11-year-old and continue to do so as I approach half-century. It gives me a reason to look up to my nation's flag, its military and my school, for having withstood the vicissitudes of time but continue to be in the service of humanity as the motto of its founder Prince Edward said, Ich Dien: that's I serve.

But then what is that made the visit unforgettable this year. Over a period of time I have also learnt that military men are poor at conducting proceedings in a board room and all these years I have been witness to most inarticulate conduct of business at the annual general meeting of the alumni, which follows this solemn function, with everybody waiting for it to end. However, this year there happened something which gives me goose pimples even a week later.

As the meeting progressed through inarticulate noise, a nattily dressed middle aged man walked to the dais raising quite a few eye brows. His name was Lt Col RS Sandhu. He took the mike and started the address without much ado. He slowly went onto share something special. He revealed that he was a patient of Hepatitis C and how he has fought the disease.

"I am standing before you today with two kidney transplants, a liver transplant and a brain operation," he said as he looked fighting fit itching to lead a patrol on the Line of Control or a quick reaction team into a subversive hub to fight for the nation's flag. "I would not have been here before you today, if I did not belong to this place," he said and without much fanfare went onto say, "Whenever I realised the end was near, I closed my eyes, recalled my school and asked myself," how can I give up?". I was taught by this school to never to give up."

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For the first time in 20 years I saw the whole hall stand in ovation, the applause started from the middle rows, went to the rear and caught on to the front rows occupied by the generals, air marshals and admirals. I write this notebook without talking to Col Sandhu. Sometimes we reporters should not ask questions but soak ourselves in sentiments of a speech not necessarily delivered by a Barack Obama or a Narendra Modi for that matter.

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