

## National Defence College - Reminiscences

### Lieutenant General MN Batra, PVSM (Retd)\*

On the morning of 1 April 1960 in Shimla, I received a call informing me that I had been posted to Delhi. Before I could ask any further questions, the line went dead. I thought it was one of those April Fool jokes but, coincidentally, that afternoon in my office I received an official letter directing me to attend the first course of the National Defence College (NDC) commencing in two weeks time.

When I reported to the NDC on Tees January Marg, the building which had housed the British High Commission for a number of years had recently been taken over by the Defence Ministry and renovations were in progress. The Commandant was Lieutenant General Bahadur Singh and the Senior Directing Staff for Air Force, Navy and Civil Services were those who had done the Imperial Defence College course in the UK. We were just 21 officers in the first batch of students.

The big day for the College was the official inauguration by Prime Minister Nehru on 27 April 1960. He spoke extempore to nearly 40 official invitees, which included Chiefs of the Defence Services, the Commonwealth and the Foreign Secretary and the British High Commissioner. I was really exhilarated at being part of the historical event. Later during the coffee break, we met the Prime Minister for an informal chat. He remarked that he had recommended a broad syllabus for the College so that students get exposed to all shades of opinion before advocating a policy for the country consistent with our National interests. This 'Open Window' approach was for me an important guiding factor not only as a student, but later as Senior Directing Staff (Army) and finally as the Commandant of the NDC in 1973-74.

Our first batch consisted of individuals who had strong views. We often clashed with our Directing Staff who had graduated from the Imperial Defence College in the UK (now called the Royal College of Defence Studies) as they tended to have a somewhat 'colonial' outlook. In that academic environment for just over a year our pioneer batch bonded well which helped overcome many problems later in our professional careers.

It was a welcome relief to come back to the College as a member of the Directing Staff after 10 stressful years, which included my appointment as Director of Military Intelligence. A few months later, the 1971 war was upon us and I was pulled out to act as a military spokesperson for briefing the world press on the conduct of the war. These assignments brought home the lessons we learnt in matters of national defence and strategy. As it happened, I was fortunate to take over as Commandant, NDC and was thus able to include most of these lessons into the curriculum of the College. To quote just three examples, it was quite apparent that newly joined senior officer students had very little exposure to economic affairs. I therefore, contacted our present Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh (who in the 1970s was considered to be the leading economist) to give the Opening Address on two successive occasions. These talks were in simple layman's language - without too many figures and statistics - and covered a broad survey of the world economy with particular reference to India. They were well received and, more importantly, made students realise that all National policies emanate from the economic strength of a country. During my tenure as SDS (Army) it was the practice during the Social & Political Study that only selected politicians at the Centre and States were invited to address the College. We were, therefore, only listening to the Government's viewpoint. This was not according to Prime Minister Nehru's "Open Window" approach as mentioned earlier. With the permission of the Ministry and soon after taking over as Commandant, we introduced panel discussions with other major political parties with a renowned journalist (Inder Malhotra) as the moderator much like the panel discussions we have on our leading TV channels today. I shall always remember one such politician, the late Piloo Mody (Swatantra Party) whose lively sense of humour kept us in splits of laughter!

After dealing with foreign military attaches in the capital as also our own attaches in all parts of the world for almost a decade, I was firmly of the view that a foreign tour by NDC students would broaden their outlook by personally meeting world leaders and understanding their policies towards us. Every time we put up a proposal for a foreign tour one or two would get through but most of them would be turned down by Finance. Somehow, I managed to convince the Defence Minister - after several one-to-one meetings - of the advantages of such tours. Since then, such tours in groups to different countries of the world have become a permanent fixture of the College curriculum.

On 27 April 2010, the NDC celebrated its Golden Anniversary. The celebrations were inaugurated by Vice President Hamid Ansari with the unveiling of a portrait of Prime Minister Nehru. Ex-Commandants living outside the capital were also invited as guests. I felt very proud being the only member of the alumni who was present in the same lecture hall 50 years later. The College now has the strength of 100 student officers including 25 foreigners. For many years, the Chiefs of our own Defence Services, as also Sri Lanka, have been amongst the alumni of the NDC. Over these past 50 years, the College has certainly proved to be one of the finest institutions of its kind in the world.

In conclusion, I would like to relate an incident during my second year as Commandant. The College was invited to meet Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for a 'Question and Answer' session at Parliament House. Half way through the proceedings, her Secretary handed her a note. Her facial expression changed completely. She then asked me to close the proceedings as she had to return to her office immediately. In her excitement, she literally 'hopped and skipped' down the corridor. As I took leave, she thanked me and said "The NDC has certainly brought good luck - I have just heard our scientists have successfully exploded an atomic bomb at Pokhran!"

**\*Lieutenant General MN Batra, PVSM (Retd)** was commissioned into the Corps of Signals in 1940. He saw active Service in Waziristan, North Africa, Palestine, Iran and Iraq during World War II. He retired as the Commandant National Defence College, New Delhi. Post retirement, he has been a regular contributor of 'middles' to the Times of India.

