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THE National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla (Pune), is India's premier tri-service pre-commission training institution. - File photo

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi (retd)

THE National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla (Pune), is India's premier tri-service pre-commission training institution. It has a grand tradition of hosting the alumni to commemorate the golden jubilee of their passing-out. Our batch graduated in December 1970, but the celebrations — delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic — were held last year.

It was during the first week of January 1968 that some 250 of us in our mid-teens entered the NDA through the Pashan Gate, fulfilling our most cherished dream. After all, joining the NDA was not just our first choice — it was the only choice. We were immensely proud of our achievement as everyone had made it purely on merit. Coming from various corners of the country with diverse backgrounds, we were cast overnight into one mould — that of 'CADET' (Character, Adaptability, Devotion, Empathy, Trust).

During three years of arduous training, the NDA motto, ‘Service Before Self’ (Seva Parmo Dharma), got deeply ingrained in our DNA. We were divided into 12 squadrons (A to L); our respective squadrons meant everything to us. We fought tooth and nail in various competitions to bring glory to our squadron and win the ‘Championship Banner’.

Once commissioned into various services, the ‘coursemate-squadron’ bond was to become eternal. The most reliable ‘helpline’ when in dire straits was invariably that of our coursemates, and a response was always assured, notwithstanding the circumstances. Many of us shared episodes which vindicated this unique legacy. When I was commanding a battalion in Siachen, coursemates in aviation circumvented the protocols on more than one occasion to undertake emergency sorties. In another instance, when my division was conducting a counter-insurgency operation, which appeared to be in jeopardy due to delay in the allocation of air support, a ‘J’ Squadron mate (an Air Marshal) came to our rescue, getting clearance from the Air Headquarters telephonically.

During the get-together, though now we were on the wrong side of the seventies, our spirits were as vibrant as half a century back. We went around the iconic buildings — Sudan and Science Blocks, the Cadet Mess where 1,500 of us dined together, and Peacock Bay. At the ‘Hut of Remembrance’, we paid homage to our buddies who made the supreme sacrifice during the 1971 war — a few without even drawing their first pay cheque. Members of our batch had a baptism by fire; many of us went straight to war on commissioning.

The NDA is currently celebrating its diamond jubilee. During the past 75 years, the topography of Khadakwasla has undergone a profound makeover and much water has flown down the Mutha river, yet ‘Service Before Self’ continues to define the soul of the NDA.