



## A LIFE FULFILLED

### Commodore G S Kanwal (Retd)

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#### Struggle Phase

Life is a journey wherein we meet fellow travelers, face various kinds of challenges and come across varied opportunities. It is the way one deals with such offerings that decides the quality of life one transcends. My life also started in one of the remote villages of

Punjab where my family had settled down after traumatic upheaval of partition in 1947. My late father, a 2nd world war veteran, was trying to keep the wolf away from the door with a meager income from farm land supported by miniscule pension of Rs. 13/- per month. Having served in the British Indian Army he knew the value of education and he had planned to send me and my elder brother to Lahore for higher studies, but the partition had upset the apple cart. As against the fertile land that we had back in Pakistan the land allotted in lieu in Punjab was almost barren with very little irrigation facilities. With those economic conditions of the family I and my elder brother were merely able to complete education till Matric. My brother was able to pick up a teaching job and as was the wish of my late father I was drafted into Navy as a boy entry sailor.

The long and eventful journey started from Jullundur Cant railway station from where a 16 year old young innocent boy from a village in Bhatinda district of backward region of Punjab who had never travelled beyond the nearby town, setting forth to a faraway and unknown place , Vishakhapatnam. I vividly remember the painful departure from the Cant Station as there was no one from family to see me off and I was all alone a naval recruit. A few tears rolled down my cheeks but perhaps deep down in my heart I knew it was the start of the journey of opportunity.

#### Foundation Building

It was the September of 1956 when I landed up in the New Entry camp of INS Circars. Finding that camp was the first challenge as I could neither speak Hindi nor English but somehow managed to convey. From then onwards it was an interesting and eventful journey, converting challenges into opportunities; switched over to artificer apprentice scheme and landed up in INS Shivaji. Here it is perhaps worth mentioning that one can excel in a career only in the field of one's choice where one enjoys working. While at INS Circars I had taken a liking for electrical engineering and it was imperative that I pick up that branch. As the luck would have it, from our class A/31, branches were to be allotted as per order of merit to distribute talent in all branches. As per that students standing 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, & 4<sup>th</sup> were to be allotted Elect. Engg. Air Engg. & Swrt branches respectively.

As I was a bright student, the only way to get what I wanted was to aim at 1<sup>st</sup> rank, attained it and got the branch of my choice. In 'C' term shifted to INS Valsura, continued to do well in studies and always stood first in all terms. I had also picked up rudimentary skills in basketball at INS Circars and over a period excelled in this game to become a Command level player. Outstanding in academics and excelling in sports is a heady mixture which made me highly popular and that made me the apple of every one's eyes. I was given the first leadership role as Apprentice CPO and passed out with distinction as the best all rounder of my batch.

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### **Glorious Naval Career**

Thereafter, never looked back; posted to INS Talwar, designated as CW candidate, passed various boards and got commission in Feb 1967. The second phase of journey thus started on a happy note. But the challenges became fiercer as thereafter the boy from the village had to compete with those coming from elite universities or NDA. If one has the competence, confidence and urge to achieve something nothing comes in the way and everything falls in place. One year training in UK, coveted appointments including DLO & Cdr (L) Vikrant and the first Training Captain of my Alma-mater INS Valsura were some of the tell tale signs of good career progression. The final feather in the cap came as the appointment to the post of Project Director Under Water Ranges Goa before retirement in the Rank of Commodore. On the way through this fascinating journey there were many ups & downs and stiff challenges; to negotiate them successfully there are certain traits that are essential. I would like to narrate below a few of the essential ones.

### **“ I can do it” Attitude**

Early in my career as a Vth class artificer I was appointed to INS Talwar; Lt JN Sukul was the Electrical Officer. During that training period, instead of sticking to just one particular section I became volunteer to work on equipments in all sections of the ship, sweated it day & night. Wherever there was a work to do or fault to attend to EAP-V Kanwal was there. The often-heard phrase “That is not my job” was not there in my dictionary. This set the solid professional foundation which was facilitated by knowledge gained at INS Valsura and the thorough knowledge of all systems gained on board. In due course that attitude of mine had impressed Lt Sukul so much that whenever there was problem anywhere in the department, he would ask for me disregarding even senior artificers. That showed his tremendous faith in my abilities and recommended me as a CW candidate. That professional competence stood me in good stead throughout my career. I was rewarded with one-year weapon maintenance course to UK. I was specially selected to head Electrical department of INS Vikrant after Parliamentary question was asked regarding Indian Navy’s ability to re-commission INS Vikrant after a modernization refit as, even after 3 years refit, the ship was in terrible shape with all equipment & systems lying dismantled either in the dockyard or on board the ship; The parliamentary question surmised that the ship may have to be written off. PM Mrs Indra Gandhi was furious; post haste NHQ in Aug-81 assembled a crack team to get the ship going; I was selected as Cdr (L) by Adm Sukul, my first electrical officer, who was then ACOM (Systems) and transferred me by signal to INS Vikrant immediately. I accepted the challenge and along with other team members got the requisite equipment going and sailed the ship to Cochin on 2<sup>nd</sup> Jan 1982. It was a difficult task well executed and got recognition from all quarters. Above all what really mattered was the self satisfaction one gets from a job well done. There were many more such challenges faced, ups & downs negotiated in the naval career, but my attitude always remained the same – to accomplish the task at hand come what may. Ultimately all good things must come to an end and my highly satisfying Naval career was also coming to an end; I decided to hang my boots, somewhat prematurely, to step into next phase of life in the civil street to taste the flavor of things on other side of the fence; I retired on 31 Dec 1993.

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### **Touch & Feel of corporate life**

Post retirement Job was already tied up with Larsen & Toubro (Cement Division) and I reported to L & T Cement plant 60Kms from Raipur to a hostile reception. I was designated as Dy Gen Manager (Personnel & Administration). The perception in corporate world is that the service officers are only good at security and admin duties totally oblivious of capabilities of the technical officers particularly of the Navy. With 37 years of experience with varied jobs profiles it was of no bother to me. My first priority was to establish my credentials and get accepted as a member of the team, and second was to pick up threads of the job at hand. It didn't take long to settle down as we had to face head on the frequent and dangerous agitations by villagers who were prodded by political leaders in respect of land acquisition matters for the cement plant. They used to *gherao* the factory and residential colony every other week. On sensing the commotion the Unit head used to run away to Raipur leaving me to handle the situation with three colleagues, Chief Security officer - a Wing Commander, Admin Manager – a Petty Officer (S&S branch) and a Personal Manager. We did manage to ensure food and other essential supplies to families in the colony and to the duty personnel in the factory. Safety of the factory was also ensured. In this connection I had to visit Bhopal a number of times to meet the Chief Minister and other ministers. Ultimately the matter was resolved permanently with the help of police with the blessing of the CM. In due course the hostile attitude of the management changed to respect and full-fledged acceptance as a member of the team. Not only that, after about 3 years I was promoted to Sr Dy Gen Manager and asked to take charge of HR functions of the entire cement division comprising of 6 cement plants spread all over India and. I was posted at mother plant at Awarpur a place around 150 Kms from Nagpur.

This job involved upgrading skills of the entire workforce, drawing policies for pay and promotion and that demanded frequent interaction with HRs of other 9 divisions of the L & T. It was a very enriching and satisfying experience. Finally, as per the L & T policy time had come to once again retire at the age of 60 years. The seven years in L & T gave me insight into how the corporate world works; how to deal with government bureaucracy and many nuances of the labour relations and work culture in the industry. Before the approaching retirement we had to decide where to settle down; even though we had the choice to settle at NOIDA or Lohkhanwala at Mumbai as we had apartments at both those places. We decided to settle at Nagpur as we found it a slow paced city with lot of open and green spaces and ideally suited for retired life. In keeping with that decision we had bought a 510 Sqm plot very close to airport on one of the main roads of the city. We bid adieu to L & T on 20 Sep-2000 and settled down in Nagpur in a rented apartment; that ended another eventful phase of journey of life and the beginning of equally interesting and challenging next phase.

### **As an Entrepreneur**

Though various organizations retire people at 60 it is too early for an active person to sit idle. This question is faced by everyone and I was no exception. But the million-dollar question was what next? The Idea slowly germinated from my daughters in-laws; Capt MS Kohli, the famous mountaineer, whose 2<sup>nd</sup> son is married to my daughter; he had set up a small hotel

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(Guest House) with 23 rooms at East of Kailash New Delhi. Why not set up a similar hotel at the plot we had bought earlier. The plot was ideally suited as it was situated at one of the most important main roads (Wardha Road) of the city and just a stone's throw away from the Nagpur airport. Without much eddo, we jumped into this project and the construction started in right earnest in end 2001. The finances are always a problem as money is never enough; loans were willingly offered by ICICI bank. The underlying belief was if the hotel didn't pick up the building will serve at least as a residence. EMI would be a problem but again if push comes to shove one of the apartments could be disposed off. Calculated risk was taken but people questioned the wisdom of starting such a risky project at ripe old age of 60 particularly when one does not have any business experience and more so in the hospitality line. I have always maintained that the Naval service has given us such a diverse exposure in technical and managerial skills that there is nothing that we can't do. The project rolled on and we commissioned a 20-room hotel in Sep-2003 to welcome the first guest. From That day onwards we never looked back; there were many challenges that we had to face, finances for furnishing the hotel was one and we had to dispose of the apartment at NOIDA rather than take more loan burden. The other issues were of staffing and finding right kind of managers; systems and procedures were to be established to run the show smoothly. We haven't looked back since then. Location of the hotel being close to the airport and situated at one of the important arterial roads greatly helped in stabilizing the operations. We have since paid all the loans and built some more assets. Around 6 years ago we bought the adjacent plot and expanded the hotel to 44 rooms. The operations are fully stabilized now but we have to be always alert to keep track of the competition and market conditions.

### **Relax, reflect and enjoy**

The hotel project has been highly rewarding, though it was executed with many difficulties and lot of hardships. It has provided employment to around 40 people which is a service to the society and providing succor to so many families. But to me personally it has been a real blessing in disguise. Meeting various kinds of people provides opportunity for socializing which I am really enjoying. Besides that, I am daily rubbing shoulders with young staffers ensuring quality time in cheerful surroundings. It enables me to continue to work around 3 to 4 hours daily and that keeps me physically fit and mentally alert. It has been a win-win situation for all. Perhaps the God has always been on my side but as the saying goes "God helps those who help themselves"

### **Inspiration for those who seek it**

For those who would like to take inspiration from my eventful and very satisfying journey of life the following are some of the cardinal points worth pursuing: -

- a) Ultimately it is the end outcome that matters; if you are able to deliver results irrespective of the field you are in, whether military service, corporate environment or even in the political field; people will always will respect your competence and encourage you irrespective of your cast, creed or religion; that is the sure way to success.

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- b) To achieve the results, one needs solid foundation of knowledge, skill, and capacity & attitude to work hard. The mentality “that is not my work” is never be allowed in.
- c) After all said and done, no one, no matter how intelligent or highly qualified or skilled he may be, it is the team work with ability at networking which ultimately produces the desired results.
- d) In entrepreneurial endeavors money will never be enough; fortune favors those who take calculated risks. If the project is basically viable money somehow becomes available. That should not hold you back.
- e) The circle of family and friends also plays a very important role by providing moral and all kind of support throughout one’s life; their support and blessings are invaluable in this journey of life.
- f) Last but not the least sports play a very important role in developing one’s personality; sportsman spirit is an essential character-building trait; this aspect of life should never be lost sight of particularly at a younger age

That is all I would like to offer as advice towards happy and fulfilling journey of life; it is for every individual to make sense out of it and see what works for him/her and make the best use of that.

May GOD Bless you and be with you