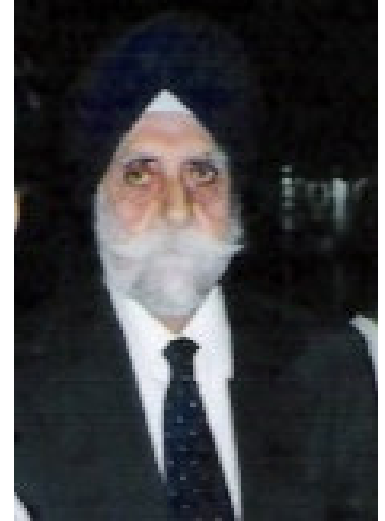


Tribute to a Leader

By: Sanjeev Baitmangalkar

This article is a tribute to the late Air Cmde K. D. Singh (AVSM) - the first Principal of Sainik School Bijapur. The author tells us about his leadership qualities using incidents, lessons and stories from the lives of other Ajeets besides his own. To know more about what leadership is really all about, read on ...



“Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible” – General Colin Powell. If asked to picturise ‘Leadership’ what would you see? How would it look? What would it wear and drive? What qualities would you find in it? What recognition would you associate with it? What name would you assign to it? For those of you who have read the Bhagwat Gita know that there is every management lesson in there. The best form of Leadership this world has known and recognises came in a frail looking form, always wore a hand woven loin cloth, a stick for a walking companion, usually walked on God given legs and sometimes rode the third class compartment of a steam engine train, both humble and simple to the core, his elevated level of thinking made this five feet something walk tall. The Crown bowed to this naked fakir. Not only did he liberate a nation, but inspired many. The name is Mahatma – Mohan Karamchand Gandhi.

[President Zakir Hussain & Shri. S.R.Kanthi](#)



And like him are others and you can make your own list. Many like to be leaders, the egoistic like to be recognized as a leader, but what human qualities must we learn, imbibe and practice every day to become a leader? Leaders like K D Singh have imbibed many lessons from the Mahatma and lived by them. For those that had the good fortune to be part of Sainik School

between 1963 and 1970 are among the privileged, whose life was rewarded by crossing path with one of the finest examples in leadership, and one of the finest human beings – the leader of leaders, late Air Cmde K. D. Singh. Ask any of his students or staff and they all remember him with the highest reverence

and respect. Only a true leader leaves such an indelible imprint on the minds of lesser mortals. What made him so distinguished and different to the crowd? Here is what we can learn.

K D Singh possessed strong character that laid the foundations for his excellence as a leader and a human being. We wrote the NDA entrance exam and awaited the results with great expectation. The results came one fine morning, and my number was not in the list. So everyone thought, and I did too, that I had failed. Almost everyone else had got through the written. Not surprising I got a mouthful from almost everyone. I could do nothing but hang my head in shame.

Few months later we all appeared for the SSLC exam. The tenure at school was over and we all went to our hometowns for summer vacation, awaiting the results and whatever that lay in store for us. In those days the school magazine used to be printed at the Samyukta Karnataka press in Hubli. My father coordinated the printing work for the school. During the holidays, our results were published. I had passed securing a first class. The marks card came later – I think sent by the school. When I sought admission in the P C Jabin College in Hubli, the Principal was so delighted firstly that I was from Sainik School and then he had seen my marks, so with this combination he now expected me to secure a rank for his college in the PU exams. All I was thinking was about playing cricket; after all I was coached by Gopal Pai and P. S. Vishwanath.



The print proof of the school magazine for that year was ready. My Dad said to me, “Come son, let’s go meet your Principal, he is passing through Hubli today.” K D Singh was on his way to Bijapur, and we met him at the railway station. I got another wash down from him on the platforms of the Hubli railway station. “I have seen your SSLC marks, and I think you have deliberately failed the NDA exam, blah,

blah, blah.” I felt sad; I felt ashamed and was hurt not by what he said but that I had failed. When I joined the school we had just been attacked by Pakistan and China, and I had conjured all kinds of chivalrous dreams of how I would fight defending my motherland. So it was like my first brush with destiny, I had to see my dreams blown away.

In November of 1969, I received a surprise envelop from the National Defense Academy. I opened it with expectations of good news inside. There was a letter signed by the then Commandant of NDA AVM S N Goel, and in a lot of standard printed form letter was tick marked the clause that said “the Principals of all Sainik Schools are authorized to send a certificate certifying that you have passed an equivalent of 10th standard exam (since we took the exams before SSLC). Since your certificate having passed an equivalent of the 10th standard exam has not reached us by the specified date, as per clause so & so, sub clause so & so, para so & so, your result is being withheld and shall not be declared.” I was disheartened. Why did it have to be like this? Why was I paying for a folly that was not mine?



I made a photo copy of that letter and went to meet the Principal; he was passing through Hubli again and had asked to meet my Dad and me at the station. And when we met and I handed over the letter to him, he read it and said, “I am extremely sorry for this and all that I have said. I do not know how such a mistake has happened. I will take the OS to task. This is such a big mistake on our part. I am really sorry.” It was both his words and the way he said it that wiped away the guilt feeling I had and all the sadness that surrounded my not having cleared the NDA exams. What distinguishes a true leader and an excellent human being is his ability to say “I am truly sorry” and mean it. With his words of regret condoning my results and accepting me for who I was put me back on life’s track and helped me make a second beginning. Since we all held him with such high reverence and respect, his acceptance was important to me. He did not fail me.

We met again after 32 years during the Annual OBA meet of 2002 in Bangalore. And I asked him, “Sir, do you remember ...?” And he smiled and said with admiration, “Yes ... I hear you have done well.” His eyes told me he meant every bit of what he said – another characteristic quality of an excellent human being.

Building the school from the drawing boards is no small task. He had to deal with the State bureaucracy and sanctions of budget, the notorious Public Works Department, water board, KEB and others? He must have had tremendous problems, mountains to move, and what not while staying focused on nurturing every student to his full potential. What did K D Singh display in his actions? That he was willing to risk his success, sacrifice his time, spare no effort to solve the problems and build the school, but not willing to compromise his integrity. And that takes character. How a leader deals with circumstances of life tells you many things about his character. A crisis doesn't make character, but certainly reveals it.

“Adversity is a cross road that makes a person choose one of the two paths – character or compromise,” writes John Maxwell. Every time you choose character you become stronger even if the choice brings negative consequences or results. Development of ones character is at the heart of ones development not just as a leader but also as a human being. Actions speak louder than words. Your action is the real indicator of your character. Your character determines who you are. Who you are determines what you see. What you see determines what you do. That is why a leader's character is synonymous with his actions. If a leader's intentions and actions are working against one another then looking at his character will tell you why. Character is much more than talk.

S. Nijalingappa the then Chief Minister of Karnataka inspecting the Ceremonial Parade



K D Singh was a charismatic leader. Within the practice of leadership, charisma is thought to be the quality that, though often considered metaphysical, represents the hallmark of inspirational leadership. If leadership has something to do with inspiring a cadre of followers to do things not only in their own interest but also for the greater good, then we certainly need individuals who have a special talent to recruit others to work together towards a common cause. Now you know why we were fortunate to be nurtured by the world's most fantastic teachers! Often, such individuals have heroic qualities because they persist in spite of the odds against them. They possess characteristics, such as courage and persistence, to face and prevail against those who would resist their noble efforts.

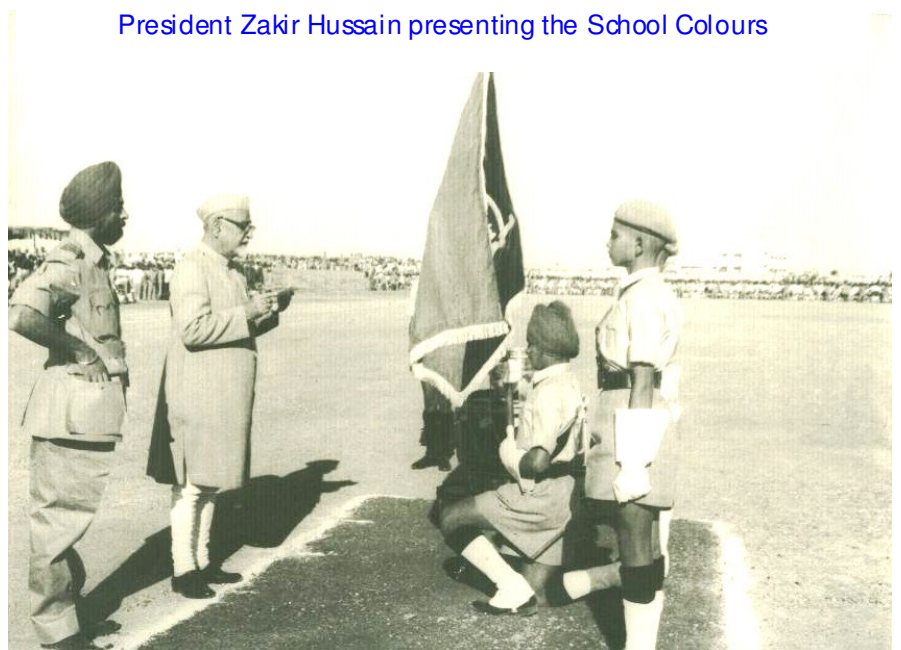
K D Singh was a leader high on commitment. When I asked our first School Captain Lt. Col. B G V Kumar (Retd), this is what he had to say:

“The awe inspiring figure of Air Commodore KD Singh, AVSM (then Wg Cdr) was a constant factor in the premises of Vijaya College where the humble beginnings of Sainik School, Bijapur was made. He took over from Lt Col Mullik within three months of the commencement of the school. His task was unenviable as he had to build up the school against all odds, get the new premises ready for the school to shift and at the same time do justice to the development of the students under him.

I was appointed the School Captain by him I suppose (on recommendations of the staff then) for whatever capabilities I had. Though I was the first link between the students and the Principal, I had very little interaction with him. There came a time when I was pulled for an aberration which was unbecoming of a School Captain. I was marched up to the Principal and promptly demoted to the ranks. These facts were unknown to most of the students and the staff.

In spite of all this, I was selected to represent the school in the Republic Day Parade at Delhi along with KN Mirji (now an active Maj Gen). I attended an Adventure Camp at Pahalgam along with four other students and sent alone to HMI Darjeeling to attend the Basic Mountaineering Course. The post of House Captain for the Chalukya's was awaiting my return. It was a matter of time before I wore the tabs of the School Captain once again. All this happened in a matter of three and a half years.

The point of my telling this story is to illustrate the greatness of Air Commodore KD Singh, AVSM. For whatever I am today this great soul has had a major role in shaping my character. I could have been a broken soul as a student after I was demoted. From the background, with least or no indication that he is watching me and nurturing me to my full potential, this noble soul built me back to my original confidence and capabilities to face the wide wild world. He stands in front of me always as a colossus in my shaping up to a good human being and a useful citizen of this motherland.



My Dear Sanjeev, I am happy that I could contribute as I had a story which was never told before. Do you remember that during those days, two Presidents of India visited our School? Has it ever happened after that? All this was because of K D Singh. First was Zakir Hussain who presented the school colours and the next was V. V. Giri. K D Singh was a man who never demonstrated that he is doing something. He was a silent solid worker who produced results and even then, never gloated on his achievements. As far as good work is concerned, he never let his left hand know what his right hand did.

Always smartly turned out, impressive and unassuming figure with exemplary manners and to top it all, soft spoken. What more can we expect from a human being? Weren't these the perfect virtues in a human? I could go on and on. Suffice for now. Good hunting for your stories."

The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire. Individual commitment to a group effort is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work. Although his talent created the potential for greatness, he could not have influenced us without his commitment. The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential... these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence. To K D Singh it's all this and much more, because everyone else was depending on him. He was truly committed; his commitment inspired others and attracted people. He



showed that he had conviction. Followers believe in the leader only if the leader believes in the cause. People will buy into the leader first, then his or her vision. There are only two options regarding commitment. You're either in or out. There's no such thing as a life in-between. And K D Singh was completely in.

David Swartz, Professor at Columbia State University and author of *The Magic of Thinking Big* writes, "The size of a man is not determined by his rank, designation or recognition, it's neither the house he lives in nor the amount of money he has or makes, but by the size of his thinking." To this I would like to add that the size of the man is also determined by the size of his heart. K D Singh was a magnanimous, empathetic and a generous leader. When I asked Col. Ashok R Patil (Retd), he called him the 'Lion

hearted K D Singh' and this is what he had to recall:

'Great things are accomplished by larger-than-life individuals shouting commands, giving directions and inspiring the troops. But, there are some Good people who get involved with people under them or empathize with their feelings and leave an ever lasting mark on the organizations they once headed.'

Kind and Dedicated Simha; that was the lion hearted KD Singh.

An episode flashes to my mind when I recall the memory of that great soul. Let me begin this way. One view of life's arrangement is that of a nature's cycle, a sequence of overcast skies, thunder, rain and sunshine. It was extremely rough weather for me during the school days. In fact when destiny had thrown me out; Sainik School, Bijapur provided an opening to restart my schooling that had closed for a year plus and I had been rotting in my maternal village.



By stroke of chance, destiny decided to provide a fleeting chance. Kindness came showering from some known and unknown quarters. Finally after an uphill financial struggle we managed to muster the statutory requirements, I found admission into the Sainik School. Some how much against my hurt pride I was compelled into a borrowed living and daily support from school colleagues in their contributions in terms of dresses, socks, shoes and so on. Time passed on.

At the end of second term, I gathered courage, collected my hurt pride and decided to put an end to these daily miseries. I sought for the Principal's interview and requested the Lion Heart for some menial job to help me earn during the term break to meet my requirements. This man heard me out patiently and asked, "Isn't your presence with your mother at such moments in life a greater need than your request for work?" The question put an end to my hopes to resolve my recurrent daily humiliation. There was no option left. And then out of pensive mood his head rose and spoke out, 'Go son, all your requirements will be taken care of and you will not be asked for any payments till you graduate and are capable of repaying. The dues were cleared out when I got selected to Indian Military Academy and became eligible

for a bank loan. It is payback time for me now. God willing, I desire to sponsor some scholarship for needy students of the school to let another household be lit with hope and well being.

You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you. Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Leadership is more about the heart and less about the head. Generosity is not the sum given, but the manner in which it is bestowed. With this act not only did K D Singh seal the future of Ashok Patil in the safe cusp of his hands, but also taught him an unforgettable lesson in generosity, thus rekindling faith, trust and hope in the hearts of their entire family. Like Mother Teresa once said, “We cannot do great things on this Earth, only small things with great love.”

“There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. The little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether it is positive or negative,” wrote Clement Stone. K D Singh was a possibility thinker. He was a person in whom we saw only positive attitudes that made the difference.

I asked Cmd Vinod Joseph (Retd) in London to pen his memories of K D Singh, and this is what he had to say about the man of wisdom:

Shramdaan

Those early batches built the school brick by brick



“There is a saying in Africa that when a wise man passes away, his library burns. In other words, all the wisdom that was part of the person vanished as the candle got snuffed. That is how I will remember Air Cmde KD Singh – a man of

wisdom. A student of one of the early batches, I saw him through the formative years of the school.

My father Maj. Joseph as the school’s first Headmaster joined him in Bangalore, while plans were underway for setting up the school. The Maharajah of Mysore, Sri Jaychamarajendra Wodeyar in a grand gesture, had offered the Lalitha Mahal Palace, with its inimitable views of the mountains, its

location and all the acreage; to set up the school. His main condition was that the school should carry the Wodeyar name.

Sri S R Kanthi was then the Education Minister and Bijapur was his constituency. A politician, who thought like one, saw mileage in planting the school in his district. The Maharajah's kind offer was hastily declined and Bijapur became the chosen venue. The school became a feather in Sri Kanthi's Gandhi cap who later became the Vice-President of India.

Since the times when Mohammad Adil Shah built the Gol Gumbaz, Bijapur had atrophied down the centuries, a place littered with tombs of varying dimensions, almost a ghost town. Arid, barren and semi-desert, the school was almost an anomaly in that setting.



Air Cmde KD Singh, Wg.Cdr Damodaran and my parents, moved to Bijapur as dictated, and the school began almost camp style on premises leased from the Vijaya College. Homes were without electricity and at night one lit petromax lamps. My father, who left school in a few months on another assignment, considered Bijapur one of his best postings. Among the attributes he liked most about the first Principal under whom he worked, was his great honesty and integrity.

Air Cmde KD Singh gave form and direction to the way the school was to develop from its embryo form. One remembers the sense of duty of the teachers, the morning news readings, philosophical lectures in the assembly hall peppered with Sanskrit slokhas, and the opportunities to develop one's mind and talents. One also remembers Air Cmde KD Singh for the words "shramdaan" and "tree planting." It was not surprising that he was later to become head of the Education branch in the Air Force, like his successor Commodore Lobo, who ran the Navy's Education branch.

Among the book prizes that I picked up in school, were "The great dialogues of Plato," "An autobiography of truth," and "A life – Abraham Lincoln." Most of the books used to be picked up from Poona's well known bookshop; Manneys. The titles twice surprised me – at the time because I understood little of what I read, and later for the wisdom with which they had been chosen by our teachers.

If one perceives that the early school years had limitations, it would perhaps be due its military leanings, whereas a school should be free from such a bias. Of course it was meant to train military officers, “Catch them young,” being the keyword. Those of us who joined the armed forces saw the advantages of such training.

If one witnessed our institution rise up from nothing to take its present form, it is a tribute to his leadership and to the teachers who were part of the team, their dedication and sincerity. There were many stalwarts among them, some of whom have likewise passed on. One remembers them with great respect and affection; and Air Cmde KD Singh himself, as a man of few words, a good teacher, fine personality, religious, philosophic and an institution builder.”

As a student of leadership, I try to study various persons in leadership positions. I am invited to write about the subject in various Industry publications, and to speak on the subject. If I am asked to pick one man who is picture perfect as a leader, it is none other than K D Singh. To me personally he will always be the greatest role model to emulate, be it in his leadership qualities or his qualities of excellence as a human being. The world is poorer today with his passing on. But he has sowed and nurtured many seeds that are beginning to grow and blossom. Surely there will be some who will live upto the values taught and demonstrated by him.



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