



Mountains and molehills by Maj-Gen G G Dwivedi (retd)

IT was the maiden day of our new academic session in Sainik School, Amravati. To everyone's relief, the whole class had been promoted. As seventh graders, we had inched up the ladder, with two classes as cushion to boss over. Sitting in the freshly constructed block, amidst din and the nose deep into the new textbooks, our homesickness had already vanished.

The staff list displayed on the noticeboard had indicated only one change in respect of our class. For English, it was to be Mr Michael St John. We soon gathered that he was a fresh graduate, barely 22, and was due to join the following week.

On Monday, we excitedly waited for the new English teacher. As Mr John entered the classroom, we were enamoured by his impressive personality and deportment. During introduction, he went over his early years, gave a snapshot of his family, including girlfriend, and details of home county, which was near London. He had represented college in football and rowing, besides being an experienced mountaineer.

In less than an hour, we were totally at ease with our new teacher. However, Mr John's accent and his preference to be addressed by first name, took some time to get used to. Within weeks we could feel the difference, vindicated by our all-round brilliant performance. Under Mr John's tutelage, the Canoe Club took off and half a dozen boats were fabricated from the 'knockdown' kits. Canoe racing became a regular fixture and weekend hikes an addiction.

To pump up our adrenaline, Mr John would whisper sneeringly, "Indians lack killer instinct!" This was spark enough for us to fire on all burners. He took pains to develop each individual's talent. An orchestra item with plates, spoons, empty jam cans as instruments, choreographed by Mr John, was a hit during the annual day function. Some of our activities were even covered in his county newspaper. In the classroom, English period was great fun. The classics like 'David Copperfield' and 'Around the World in Eighty Days' were enacted, Mr John playing the lead roles. Discussions in the class were candid, covering a wide range of issues. Topic of British colonial rule was always a contentious one. Mr Shukla, the Hindi teacher, and Mr John became arch rivals. The two confronted each other head on. However, disengagement was always on a pleasant note.

During the India-England cricket series, the atmosphere was highly charged. When Tiger Pataudi scored a double century, Mr John was literally made to eat a humble pie.

Two years flew by, marking an end of our iconic teacher's tenure. During the farewell speech, Mr John frankly confessed that his focus was always on developing the students' attitude; honing language skills being secondary. His oft-reiterated mountaineering

fundamentals — “through preparation and acclimatisation, not to force pace and respect for nature” —had universal application.

Mr John was an ardent advocate of individualism and self effort. His pet single liner was “ones who climb with their own crooked legs stand taller atop a molehill, vis-`a-vis those who piggyback to perch on lofty mountain”.

Currently, the school is amidst the golden jubilee celebrations. The values Mr John preached and practiced have stood the test of time; being as relevant today as these were half a century back!