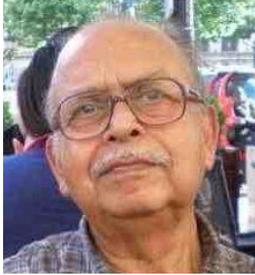


Getting into the Air Force Academy



Tapas Sen was born in Kolkata (1934), and brought up in what now constitutes Bangladesh. He migrated to India in 1948, and joined the National Defence Academy in January 1950. He was commissioned as a fighter pilot into the Indian Air Force on 1 April 1953, from where he retired in 1986 in the rank of an Air Commodore. He now leads an active life, travelling widely and writing occasionally.

Tapas Kumar Sen

Editor's note: This article originally appeared on Air Commodore Sen's blog [TKS' Tales](#). It is reproduced here with the author's permission. For the family backgrounds, see [Early Days: Jessore 1930s](#).

Passing the written test

In 1949, my first concern was getting selected for the Inter Services Wing of the Armed Forces Academy (ISW/AFA). The syllabus for the examination, conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) for entry into the ISW/AFA was limited; a total of three papers, one each on English, Mathematics and General Knowledge / Current Affairs.

In those days, there were no coaching classes available for such tests in Kolkata. The examinee was left entirely on his own. I started preparing for the test rather tentatively. I first tried to study together with my friend Gora, who was also a candidate for the examination. However, his house was very far from mine. It was difficult to get together every day. With a little bit of effort I found another student candidate who stayed a bit closer to my home. We set up a study group.

Without a doubt, it was a case of a blind leading the blind. We knew nothing of how and what to study. We purchased a year-book and mugged up everything written in that tome.

Fortunately, my lifelong habit of reading a newspaper from cover to cover every day came to my rescue. In the test, I found that questions on current affairs were not difficult for me to answer. The mathematics and English syllabi were more or less covered by our college syllabi for the same subjects. The six or seven weeks that we had between the application and the examination flew by quickly.

With a lot of trepidation, we presented ourselves at the Anderson Hall, where our tests were scheduled to be held. To my great relief, I found the question papers simple. I went through them with ease and went back to my regular daily routine happily.

The months of October and November 1949 went by quickly. Qualifying tests for appearing at the University examinations for Intermediate Science were due in December. I had to put all thoughts about joining the Air Force on the backburner and concentrate on the task in hand.

The call letter for appearing before the Air Force Services Selection Board (SSB), located in Dehradun, arrived in the first week of December. The appointment was for 12th December 1949. This clashed directly with the dates for my college tests. A decision had to be made. I chose the SSB over the college test; a big load was now off my mind. I was a bit sad that Gora had not made it through the UPSC written test. I had thought all along that we two would be together in this venture at the ISW/AFA.

More tests

The call for appearing at the SSB arrived along with another very important event. One afternoon, a relative visited us with a proposal for marriage for Monididi, the younger of my two older sisters. Before

my parents could formulate a suitable reply, a delegation from the proposed groom's house arrived within a couple of days. The proposal was attractive, but my parents were reluctant to give away the younger daughter in marriage before the older one, Didi Chitra, was settled.

The family of the proposed groom was not to be dissuaded easily. The groom had an unmarried elder cousin of suitable age. They now brought a proposal for a double alliance. They proposed the marriage of the two cousins to my two sisters. As soon as my parents accepted the proposal, the grooms' party started pressing for an immediate marriage.

In this situation, my preparation for the SSB obviously took a lower priority.

Shopping for the double marriage began in right earnest. Family fortunes were at a low ebb; getting ready for the marriage function was not easy. There was no question of buying any clothes for me. In December, it was expected that Dehradun would be very cold, but I had no warm clothing what so ever. I went on a borrowing spree and managed to collect one sweater, one lounge suit, and some sort of a jacket from friends and family. Ma managed somehow to buy me a couple of pairs of woollen socks, a new pair of leather shoes and a pair of canvas PT (*Ed. note: Physical training*) shoes.

She also managed to scrounge enough money to buy me an 'Inter Class' ticket (In those days, the Indian Railways had four classes of coaches; First – Second – Intermediate – and Third) to Dehradun. She also gave me 30 rupees as my traveling expenses. It was indeed a big sum of money in those days.

I boarded the Doon Express from Howrah with a mixture of excitement, trepidation and a nagging concern for the financial load I was imposing on the family. It was the first long distance solo journey for me.

After two nights and the intervening day in the train, a morning dawned as the train entered Hardwar station. It was very cold and frozen stiff. The meagre bedding that I had carried proved to be totally inadequate. My legs were numb in my cotton trousers. A cup of tea and a couple of toasts perked me up enough to carry me through the rest of the journey. By mid-morning we were at Dehradun.

When I got off the train at Dehradun, an Air Force Sergeant walked up to me, and asked me if I was a candidate for the SSB. I promptly surrendered myself to his care. He took me to Clement Town, where the SSB was located, in a 15-hundredweight truck.

Registration on arrival and settling in the billet took care of the rest of the morning. After lunch, the process of selection tests began. There were written tests to test our logic and our command over English language. We were then divided into small syndicates and were put through some group activities.

Night arrived early. It was quite dark by six thirty in the evening, and by eight thirty, we were in bed after dinner.

The next two days went by quickly. More group games and group discussion were followed by individual physical fitness tests and group obstacle clearance exercises. From the third morning we were taken to the Pilot Aptitude Battery Test (PABT) room and our reactions to stimuli was tested one by one. The momentum and pressure of the tests eased off. I managed to spend a little time in the anteroom of the mess after lunch and read up the newspapers.

Selection and medical test

On the fourth morning, we took our turns to face individual interviews, first with the group testing officers, and then with the commanding officer. The Officer Commanding was Wing Commander Shah, an extremely handsome Parsi officer who was then the poster boy for the Air Force. As a matter of fact, I had seen recruitment posters with his face during my first visit to the Air Force Recruitment Centre at No. 1 Gokhale Road, Calcutta. The interviews went through smoothly.

Just before lunch, all the candidates were gathered together, and told that four candidates out of 17 were declared selected. I was one of those four. While the other candidates were sent back to their homes, the four of us were routed to New Delhi for our Medical board.

From Dehradun, the over-night Doon Express brought us to the Delhi Junction Station. A three-ton lorry took us to the Central Vista Mess. 18th December 1949 was a Sunday. We had breakfast. Someone suggested that we hire bicycles for our local transportation. There was a cycle-wallah within the mess premises, just as there was a barbershop and a small store. Bicycles were available for one rupee four annas a day. It was not inexpensive but we had no option. Public transportation in New Delhi was nearly non-existent. Delhi Transport Undertaking did run a few buses on a few routes, but frequency of service seldom exceeded once an hour.

The four of us got onto four bicycles and went out to explore New Delhi.

The Central Vista Mess was a collection of hutments on the Queensway (later, named Janpath) just opposite the National Archives. It was fronted by the vast green expanses of the Central Vista along the Kingsway (later renamed Rajpath) ending at the India Gate. The Queensway ended at Connaught Place, designed to be the heart of Lutyens' Delhi. We cycled around the Inner Circle; window-shopped, ate ice cream and were back in the mess in time for dinner.

On Monday morning, we started once again on our cycles. We had been advised to follow the Queensway and ask for directions to Race Course Road. We set out briskly but were thoroughly lost in no time flat. After some aimless roaming on our cycles, we found another cyclist who was kind enough to lead us to the Race Course camp.

The Air Force Central Medical Board (AFCMB) was located at the southwest corner of the camp. We reached AFCMB and reported to the reception desk. We were taken charge of by a Sergeant who made us fill up a lot of forms with great deal of information about our family medical history. AFCMB was then commanded by Wing Commander Bhaduri.

At the end of three days of tests, the results were declared. Three of us had cleared the medical board. The fourth was advised to join the army.

Preparing for a new life, with Guruji's blessings

The journey back to Calcutta was wonderful. The Kalka Mail was much faster than the Doon Express. I reached home on Christmas Eve. Everyone at home was happy with my success except for Ma. So far, she was not sure whether I would actually get selected, and if I did, then whether I would pass the medical board. I was a sickly child when I was young, and Ma was not very certain of my medical status. Now that I was back, both selected and medically fit, the thought of my going away for a career in the Air Force started bothering her.

I was now mentally fully prepared for my new life. The date for the double marriage event had been set for 7th February 1950. Everyone at home was busy preparing for the big event. My plans were however unsettled.

The call letter to join the Academy was expected every day but in vain. At long last, when the letter finally arrived, I had only a week left to pack and go to join the academy by 30th of January, 1950.

At this moment, Ma really lost her nerves. She did not want me to go. She could not say so openly, but she was desperately trying to find an excuse to hold me back. She clutched at a straw. She said that we had not obtained a clearance and a blessing for my career option from our Guru, Sri Sri Thakur Anukul Chandra. She would not let me go without an explicit OK from him.

Father was not amused. There was no time for any clumsy manoeuvres. He decreed that we must leave for Deoghar that very evening and obtain the Guru's blessings. Ma and I left for Deoghar that night by the Banaras Express.

Travel in an unreserved third class coach by night was never a comfortable journey, especially if it was to be undertaken in the height of winter in northern India. We braved the crowded and cold winter journey. Banaras Express deposited us at Jesidih Junction at an unearthly hour in the morning.

The first local train for Deoghar was scheduled about three hours later. Another person going to the ashram recognized Ma, and got her to agree to share a Tonga ride up to the ashram instead of waiting for a train connection. We got into the Tonga, and naturally conversed about our aim of the journey.

Our co-passenger was quite certain that Sri Sri Thakur would never permit me to join a dangerous job like flying a military plane. He told us tales about how a few other young boys had sought Sri Sri Thakur's permission for a similar venture, and were promptly dissuaded by him.

The Tonga rolled on and deposited us in front of Dr Banabehari Ghosh's house. Dr Ghosh was a close friend of my father. We freshened up, had a cup of tea and went down to the ashram to meet Sri Sri Thakur as soon as he came up for the morning darshan. We reached just as he came in and took his seat.

He looked at us with a bright welcome smile and enquired about my father's health. Then he turned to Ma, and asked what had brought her to Deoghar all of a sudden. Ma described the situation and implored him with unspoken words pouring out of her eyes to hold me back. The Guru just smiled. He closed his eyes for a moment and then looked directly at me.

"So, you want to join the Air Force?" he asked me. I could only nod my head and mutter "Yes Sir." He sat upright. "Good. Very good," he said. "Go – join the Air Force, learn how to fly well and succeed as best as you can." That was that. I bowed my head at his feet, got up and left.

The elation in my heart was palpable. Now the hurdles had been crossed. Now, at least from within the family, no one would oppose my proposed career. It was a great relief.

We came back to Calcutta the very same day. Only a few days were left for me to get ready and go. Those few days flew by in a blur.

On 28th January 1950, I boarded the Doon Express at Howrah for Clement Town, Dehradun for the second time. The whole *khaandaan* (family) came to see me off at Howrah. Both the grand moms, parents and siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts, the proposed grooms for my sisters along with their parents, and of course my friends Gora, Nimai, Anil and some others. It was a *mela* of sorts. It was a fitting finale for a lifetime.

As the train pulled out of the station, I left my childhood behind forever and entered a new universe. ❖

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