

## Surviving Seventh Heaven

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As cadets at the National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla, Pune, one couldn't deduce any reason for the punishments meted out to us, as much of it was neither expiatory nor deterrent by nature. As second-termers, dismissed as the lowest of form of life, we were at the receiving end. The sixth-termers, the senior-most cadets, seldom hectored us, as handling us lowlifes was deemed *infra dig*. The third- to fifth-termers 'took care' of us. As if some esoteric science backed it, the whole course was punished even if the culprit was an individual.

A compendium of the numerous NDA punishments would turn out to be a weighty tome, but here's a sampling. A fifth-termer once asked us what the length of the squadron corridor was. We guesstimated it to be 80 metres. He bellowed, "Nothing is measured in bloody metres in the Academy." A third-termer butted in and enlightened us greenhorns. Soon we were measuring the corridor in units of front rolls, back rolls, side rolls, frog jumps, crocodile jumps, and so on! Puttee parade, the flavour of the Academy, involved darting to one's cabin, changing to the bidden rig and reporting back in five

minutes. At the end of it, both the cadet and his cabin were in disarray, and the time was ripe for the sequel: the combo of kit muster and cabin cupboard. Kit muster entailed laying out the entire kit on a blanket outside one's cabin. Cabin cupboard was simply undoing the kit muster: arranging the accoutrements in their place inside the cabin for inspection. A dose of kit muster and cabin cupboard can make even a hardy ascetic lose his marbles.

My favourite was Seventh Heaven. The cadet's cabin had a large grille above the door. Seventh Heaven meant leaping to precisely clutch the seventh horizontal rod of the lattice from the top and then recite the NDA prayer while dangling from there! I'd wittingly dashed to the cabin of a cantankerous sixth-termer, sprung to Seventh Heaven, and brayed the prayer. Perturbed, he'd bounded out of bed and banished us. That prematurely terminated the punishment session. You see, the NDA groundwork is meant not only to toughen cadets but also make them street-smart.