

Icon of the issue



Lt. Gen. Sanyal

Lt. General N. C. Sanyal (PVSM; PHS)

Born on 16th December 1932 in pre-partition India, in the small eastern village of Balihar, Gen. Sanyal was third in a family of ten siblings. Friends recall Paritosh (Gen. Sanyal's daak-naam) as a firm and decisive little boy who would easily assume the role of "Chief" during play time. Those happy childhood days were cut short by the unexpected death of his father when he was in his early teens. This setback only strengthened young Paritosh's determination to fulfill his dreams of becoming a doctor and a provider for his family. Shortly thereafter, he enrolled in Kolkata Medical College at the age of 17. Upon graduating in 1955, he found himself weighing career options. The Indian Army, with its promise of stability, transparency and rich history of traditions, appealed to him and in 1956 he was commissioned in the Army Medical Corps (AMC).

As a young officer, he saw action in the 1962 war from close quarters. Later, in the 1965 and 1971 wars, he gained significant experience as an independent surgeon handling a variety of battlefield injuries. The severe and long-term effects of these debilitating injuries on the soldiers under his care motivated him to choose Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery as a specialisation. He excelled in his chosen field. His intense desire to adopt the latest and best surgical techniques ensured that the standard of his work was consistently world-class. He also improved several techniques himself. At a very early stage in his career, his paper on the use of myocutaneous flaps received the best paper award from the Association of Plastic Surgeons of India (APSI). Decades later, in 1990, he served as the president of this very association.

Over the course of his career, Gen. Sanyal won several accolades in the field of plastic surgery, including: being asked to deliver the Sir Harold Gillies oration of the Association of Plastic Surgeons of India in 1992, being appointed President's Honorary Surgeon (PHS) in 1991, Param Vishistha Seva Medal (PVSM) for his distinguished services in 1993 and Lifetime Achievement award in 1996.

Gen. Sanyal served in various parts of the country both in field and peace stations and also abroad in Congo as part of the UN peace keeping force. He was proud to belong to the AMC and felt that it played a unique role as one of the largest organised healthcare providers in India. Gen. Sanyal's long career spanning years of dedicated service culminated in him assuming the responsibility of Director General of the Armed Forces Medical Service (DGAFMS). In this role, he oversaw the modernisation of all the Plastic Surgery Departments under his command, ensuring that they were equipped with the best and most up-to-date equipment. He also decentralised the power of the office of the DGAFMS to expedite decision-making and cut down on red tape, a decision needing courage and determination.

On a personal level, Gen. Sanyal was a gregarious man, who loved people and delighted in holding forth to an audience. His colleagues fondly recall many evenings spent in his company – the General, surrounded by his friends and colleagues, deeply engaged in different strands of conversation floating around the room, always accessible, listening attentively and ensuring everyone felt included. Gen. Sanyal is still remembered as an extremely compassionate man who went out of his way to help others – be it a payment of the mess bill for a brother officer in need or playing the role of an elder brother to his colleagues when they needed help and guidance. Even trainees not posted directly under his command recall how he would help them get settled in and provide the much-needed logistic support when they were too embarrassed to ask for it explicitly.

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I would like to narrate a personal experience in this regard. Back in November 1981, on the very day that I was leaving for UK on a study leave, my mother fell down and suffered a triple bone fracture in her right ankle. I barely had time to apply a crepe bandage before leaving for my flight. On my way to the airport, I asked my wife to contact (then Lt. Col.) Sanyal. When my wife took my mother to him, all he said was, "Mataji, just think that Sharad (my home name) is here and I (Lt. Col. Sanyal) have gone to UK." After that there was no need for worry. He looked after her just like a son. Even when he had become Lt. Gen. and would drop in at my house, my mother would address him as "Col. Sanyal." If I tried to correct her, he would stop me, saying "Let it be that way only." This speaks volumes of the man.

He possessed a photographic memory and could recall the smallest personal details of the people who served with him, irrespective of their rank. Upon meeting him years after having served under his command, jawans, JCOs and officers alike were stunned at his ability to recall their names and immensely moved that he took the time and effort to enquire about their well-being.

Despite belonging to a hierarchical organisation like the Armed Forces, Gen. Sanyal truly believed in the equality of human beings and the spirit of inclusion. His students regarded him as an inspirational and helpful teacher. He was a very kind examiner who never humiliated a candidate or a trainee. His working style was democratic and participative, astutely recognising individual strengths and assigning appropriate responsibilities.

Officers who have served under him recall his amazing ability to motivate them to deliver their best as a collective group.

The proud soldier that he was, he faced his terminal illness with courage and a "never say die" spirit. He showed strength until the very end and still had some enlightening words for all of us. The AMC and its officers who had been an integral part of his life paid him a fitting final salute by undertaking the responsibility for his funeral and emotionally declaring "some officers never retire."

These words of his favorite poet Tagore capture the spirit of the man: "If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door, or I'll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present." We miss him and his guidance.

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