Abhimansala: To Be Visible Again

In the midst of war they sacrificed their eyes and limbs to safeguard the freedom and security of all citizens of the country from the throngs of terrorism. Their sacrifices have not been in vain, Sri Lanka is now a free country and forging ahead with rapid development. While the rest of the population leads a normal life, at times the disabled soldier is forgotten. But not anymore. Abhimansala Wellness Resort was established by the Sri Lanka Army to provide lifelong care for those who need it the most. The name Abhimansala itself means ‘an abode to live with pride.’ It is a place for these heroes to regain their strengths and once again be a visible aspect of society.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe
Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Abhimansala, which was initiated by Lt Gen Jagath Jayasuriya, Commander of the Sri Lanka Army and established under the guidance of Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the blessings of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, focuses on the rehabilitation of the disabled Army personnel in multiple spheres; namely physical, mental, social and spiritual development. Therefore this facility does not function solely as a medical hospital where the focus is only on the physical aspect. Strengthening the mind and changing their attitude to think positively is the primary focus as explained by Lt Colonel Ajith Senadeera, Commandant of Abhimansala.

Abhimansala Wellness Resort was built by the Brave Heart Foundation that comes under the purview of the Seva Vanitha Army Branch, whose President is Mrs Manjulika Jayasuriya. All expenses of the facility are covered by the Sri Lanka Army. The villas and cottages have been donated by various well-wishers and corporates.

Situated in Anuradhapura along the banks of the Nuwara Wewa, through its design and setting Abhimansala exudes a sense of tranquillity and serenity. At first glance it looks like a hotel and essentially that is what it is ‘a wellness resort’. The complex consists of a reception, lobby, restaurant, villas and cottages, kitchen, conference hall, library with internet facilities and swimming pool. Services such as housekeeping, laundry and room service are also available. However Abhimansala is unlike any other hotel, it is currently home to 46 disabled soldiers. The total capacity is 52. This functions not only as a resort but also as a fully-equipped hospital where medical treatment is provided including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, psychotherapy and hydro therapy.

Twenty disabled personnel who are able to somewhat take care of themselves have been given rooms in five villas. Each villa has two double rooms where a total of four individuals live in the same house. A caretaker is assigned to them to assist with their needs. Bathroom facilities have been made to suit each individual’s requirements. Furthermore special attention has also been given to the furniture so that the soldier has the best of comfort. Each villa has a sitting area and dining area. The residents take their meals at the restaurant or if required room service is provided. TV and cable facilities as well as internet and sound systems have been installed to ensure that these heroic Army personnel are content.

A unique aspect of Abhimansala is that the families of the residents can come and

stay for a short period of time at the fully equipped cottages specially built for them. “Just as a hotel, a resident Army personnel has to make a reservation prior to the family’s arrival. All facilities are provided to the families when they come here and we also organise a tour for them to visit the Atamasthana in Anuradhapura. When the families are here the resident also stays with them for the duration of their visit” explained Lt Col Senadeera.

Disabled Army personnel who are unable to take care of themselves and who are bedridden have been provided rooms in the hospital. And there are currently 26 such residents. Many of the residents at Abhimansala are those who have gun shot injuries, injuries from explosions such as ‘batta’ and artillery and there is one patient who had been electrocuted.

The residents’ day-to-day programme varies, firstly their medical requirements are looked into at the hospital, then they proceed for various activities such as hydro therapy, physiotherapy, relaxation, music and art therapies and meditation. As Lt Col Senadeera explains “usually people look at the outward injuries but all these personnel have undergone a very traumatic experience – they have lost a part of themselves. Therefore their mental status and confidence has to be developed. Some of them have post traumatic stress disorder. These are the most important aspects that need to be addressed.” As such at Abhimansala counselling sessions are provided and special programmes are conducted to show the residents that they still have a life. That the only thing that is preventing themselves from achieving something is themselves. Therefore Abhimansala is providing all the facilities to these soldiers to uplift themselves.

“At home the family members may not have all the facilities to take care and manage them. As such it is most important that the family is also educated so that they think positively. In some instances at home the disabled soldier is expected to look after the elderly parents while the siblings live their own lives. There is no one to care for him”, explained Lt Col Senadeera while further adding that certain wives and girlfriends who do not understand the sacrifices that these Army personnel have made for the country had left them after their injury.”

“Community participation in the rehabilitation of the disabled soldier is very important’, emphasised Lt Col Senadeera. Each patient has some kind of personal issue, but this cannot be determined from the surface and these are deep seated issues which at times are an impediment to the recovery of the individual. ‘These need to be addressed through therapy and the counsellor has to get involved

individually. What we are trying to do is that once they have been rehabilitated we want to give them the strength and the hope to lead a good life. This has been done around the world", stressed Lt Col Senadeera.

Daya Rohana Athukorale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Colombo who was conducting a seminar on positive thinking said, "anyone can adjust themselves. For example if they do not have their legs then they can use their hands even better, then those who are blind develop sharp hearing. The time that they are spending here is very good for them to develop a new skill. We can strengthen their mind and also build their confidence,' while further adding 'the most important thing that they need to hear is that they are capable. What they need is only a change in attitude and thinking. What they need to hear is that they can do. Once that is instilled in them then they will work towards it."

Once the residents start to think positively and have built their confidence the next step would be to test their IQ and also identify their talents and skills. Once they select a path to follow the Army will completely fund their training and development. "They can stay here for a couple of years develop themselves and can choose to go back home or stay here, it is their choice. There are those who have girlfriends and those who are unmarried, what we want to do is give them a livelihood so that they can have their own family. We can arrange for the wedding to be held here as well. Then they will be part of the society", explained Lt Col Senadeera.

New facilities are planned to be introduced with yoga and ayurvedhic treatment such as *panchakarma* where treatment of paralysed individuals are envisaged. Furthermore the initial planting of an Osu Uyana (herbal garden) is underway. Meditation facilities and a Buddha statue will be built soon. As many of the residents are interested in sports, a ground, basketball facilities, badminton, gym and other sports facilities will be developed.

Currently there are seven officers and 195 staff members to manage the needs of the disabled Army personnel. 'With medical officers we also need psychosocial counsellors as well. We have counselling sessions during the day and in the evenings as we are trying to build their minds. Thereafter, they can be musicians, artists or anything they set their mind to. Even at this moment we have identified many talented people. The Abhimansala anthem has been written and composed by one of the residents', stated Lt Col Senadeera proudly.

At Abhimansala both the residents and their families are educated on the rights of the disabled. As Lt Col Senadeera explained “there is a disability act in the world as well as in Sri Lanka. Even these people nor society knows about such an act. For example in a bus a disabled person has to be given a seat. These aspects also need to be addressed. Only then can we rehabilitate them.”

There Is A Reason Why Abhimansala Is Situated In Anuradhapura…That Is Because The First Kingdom Of The Country Was Established Here. The Culture And Pride Of The Nation Is Reflected In The Name Abhimansala Itself And The Residents Themselves Are In True Fact A Pride To The Nation.

There is a reason why Abhimansala is situated in Anuradhapura; that is because there are many disabled Army personnel in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kurunegala. Furthermore the first kingdom of the country was established here. Currently another Abhimansala is being built in Alauwwa. Those from the private sector are welcome to visit and their well wishes are greatly appreciated. The culture and pride of the nation is reflected in the name Abhimansala itself and the residents themselves are in true fact a pride to the nation.

Corporal Sanjeewa – The Musician

Injured on April 28,1998 near the Kilali lagoon, Corporal Sanjeewa’s lower limbs have been amputated. He has been at Ranaviru Sevana and also at home prior to Abhimansala. ‘From my younger days I have always been interested in drama and music. A lot of sad and hurtful things happened in my life. More than the environment at home and any other place that I have stayed, at Abhimansala I am really happy. I am able to do my creative work. I am able to write and the ideas come flowing to me here. I feel extremely relaxed here. The programmes that are here are definitely a stepping stone for our journey forward,’ he said confidently. The Abhimansala anthem has been written by Sanjeewa and he sings it with pride.

‘I am 100 percent happy here. Usually it takes time for me to write a song. But here creative ideas just flow into my head, specially when I walk by the lake.’ An ardent environmentalist and animal lover Sanjeewa has made friends with a squirrel that he feeds everyday in the morning and afternoon. ‘After my breakfast I go to the wewa and practice with the calypso band from the Gajaba regiment. I love music and I want to further my knowledge and singing while I am here,’ he says of his future ambitions.

‘There are many people from various units here. But we are together here. With my friends I do not let them have negative thoughts. I always keep on encouraging them’ he said while further adding, ‘after listening to the session our thoughts are changing. Even though we have come to terms with our disability at times when we see people running we used to feel sad but now we don’t feel that way because there is hope.’

Lance Corporal Silva, Lance Corporal Siripala and Private Kulathilaka – A Strong Friendship

There are many moving sights at Abhimansala where the friendship between the residents is inspiring. One such example is Lance Corporal Silva, Lance Corporal Siripala and Private Kulathilaka. Both Lance Corporal Silva and Private Kulathilaka are blind while Lance Corporal Siripala is paralysed waist down after a gunshot injury. All three were members of Light Infantry, Vijayaba Regiment and were injured on May 5, 2009 at Puthumathalan.

The three of them always go about together, Siripala is the eyes of the trio and leads in front while Silva and Kulathilaka hold on to his wheelchair and push him in the direction he chooses. “We enjoy singing together. We do everything together; eat, bathe, then in the afternoon after tea we go to the river banks. We sing with the band enjoy ourselves and go for dinner,’ explained Siripala.

Speaking about his improvements and future plans, Siripala said ‘after doing physiotherapy and other therapies I can now move my fingers and my arms, initially I could not do even that. Now I am at a much better state. Even my legs I feel an improvement so hopefully in the future I will be able to get better completely. I enjoy sports so I hope to continue with that. I would like to take part in cycle races. While looking after my family my hope is to stay here, I feel extremely relaxed here more than before. Even the environment is a peaceful and quiet. Actually I was quite depressed but after coming here I feel much better, stronger.’

‘We want to focus on our talents and develop ourselves and live a good life here. Our home lives are very monotonous, but here there is a difference even the environment gives us a peace of mind, ‘ said Lance Corporal Silva. Speaking further on their lifestyle at Abhimansala Private Kulathilaka said, ‘we are not restricted or immobile we are able to walk around hang out with our friends, we can meet and talk, even the conversations stimulate us and give us hope. By coming here what we expected is that for us to have a peace of mind to think positively.’

‘In The Future We Would Like To Live Like Any Other Person, And May Be Even Go Beyond. We Do Not Want To Be Invincible, We Want To Be Visible. Even Though I Am Blind, I Want To Go Beyond Even What A Person Who Can See Can Go. I Hope To Go Into Society And Live A Normal Life…’

‘In the future we would like to live like any other person, and may be even go beyond. We do not want to be invisible, we want to be visible. Even though I am blind, I want to go beyond even what a person who can see can go. I hope to go into society and live a normal life,’ Private Kulathilaka expressed the hopes and dreams of many.

Lance Corporal Weerakoon – Always With A Smile

Always with a smile and a joke at the tip of his tongue, Lance Corporal Weerakoon is completely blind. An artificial eye has been implanted in his left eye. His forehead was destroyed and has been reconstructed.Due to the head injury he is prone to fits. Injured on February 24, 2009 at Puthukuduirrippu, Weerakoon joined the Army at 18 years of age, now he is 23. By looking at him no one can say that he is visually impaired. Cheerful and ever ready to talk he wishes that one day he will get married and have children.

“We are provided with great assistance here. Everyone is very good to us. Considering the way we are even the surrounding environment is soothing for us. To spend time near the lake is very relaxing’ says Weerakoon. Remembering his injury he says ‘ at first I was very sad because I had lost my vision and also my forehead. My girlfriend left me after I was injured and within a few months my father passed away too, but since then I have not looked back I am happy and live each day to the fullest.’ Speaking about his life at Abhimansala, Weerakoon says ‘I do not feel that I am away from home. Because of the way everything is setup here we are like one family and we always look out for each other. We are like brothers.’ Weerakoon hopes to save and build his own house in the future. As he gathers his walking stick and finds his way back to his room he says ‘my hearing is very good now. I can identify people from their footstep. I want to tell people that we are happy. There are many disabled people in the world who have done well in life. So can we.’