

Courage and Resilience: Personal Journeys of War-Wounded Achievers

Commander Abhishek Verma®

Abstract

This essay examines the journeys of war-wounded achievers in the Indian Armed Forces who transformed grave combat injuries into platforms for continued service, leadership, and national contribution. Drawing upon verified case studies of Major Devender Pal Singh (Retd), Subedar Major (Honorary Captain) Yogendra Singh Yadav, PVC (Retd), and Major General Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd), the study analyses how resilience emerges through interaction of institutional support, family networks, military ethos, and post-traumatic growth. The essay highlights the evolution of these individuals from trauma survivors to mentors, policy advocates, and symbols of national inspiration. It further evaluates existing rehabilitation and mental health support systems within the armed forces and identifies gaps in long-term reintegration and recognition mechanisms. Based on comparative analysis, the essay proposes policy recommendations including family-centric rehabilitation, documentation archives, structured transition support, enhanced rehabilitation infrastructure, and legislative reforms to strengthen veteran welfare, institutional morale, and national resilience.

®Commander Abhishek Verma is an alumnus of the Indian Naval Academy and was commissioned into the Indian Navy's Tech cadre in 2012 as an Electrical Specialist. He has served onboard INS Delhi and as commissioning crew of INS Imphal, along with serving at Naval Headquarters and with Nava Dockyard and Weapon Group at Mumbai. Specialising in missile system maintenance, he is currently undergoing the 81st Staff Course at Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, while pursuing Masters in Defence and Strategic Studies, with research interests in international relations and hypersonic warfare.

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Introduction

As Major General Ian Cardozo recounted years later, after he amputated his mine-blown leg during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War:

"I asked my batman, 'Where is my khukri?'

He said, 'Here it is, Sir'.

I told him, 'Cut it off'.

He answered in Gorkhali, 'Sir, I can't do it'.

I told him, 'Give it to me'.

I cut my leg off and ordered, 'Now go and bury it'. Poor chap. I now have a piece of land in Bangladesh".¹

These words encapsulate a profound truth about the Indian military ethos. Courage is not merely the absence of fear in a battle, but the transformation of adversity into enduring service.² Since India's independence in 1947, its armed forces have conducted over 60 military operations across diverse operational theatres, from the icy heights of Siachen to counter-insurgency operations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the Northeast.³ These engagements have produced not only martyrs but also survivors, bearing visible and invisible wounds, who refuse to be defined by their injuries.

This essay examines war-wounded achievers, i.e., military personnel who sustained grave combat injuries yet transformed their adversity into a platform for continued service, inspiration, and national contribution. Rather than becoming a burden on military or society, these individuals chose to exemplify resilience in its most authentic form, demonstrating that courage extends far beyond battlefield gallantry to encompass the sustained will to rebuild, serve, and inspire.

The scope of this essay encompasses verified case studies of wounded personnel from major conflicts and operations since 1947, including conventional wars, counter-insurgency operations and counter-terrorism actions. Each narrative is grounded in official citations, medical records, and authenticated interviews, avoiding romanticisation whilst highlighting the institutional, familial, and personal factors that enabled successful post-injury transformation.

Through systematic analysis of these journeys, this essay seeks to extract patterns of resilience, evaluate existing support mechanisms, and propose policy recommendations for enhanced veteran care and recognition.

The significance of documenting these stories extends beyond individual tribute. With the Indian Armed Forces recording approximately 1,600 casualties annually during peacetime, primarily from accidents, training incidents, and operational hazards, understanding the trajectory from wound to achievement becomes vital for institutional morale and public support.⁴

Historical Context: India's Operational Theatres since Independence

India's operational history encompasses a spectrum of conflict intensities and geographical challenges. Major conventional wars include the Indo-Pakistan conflicts of 1947-48, 1965, and 1971; the Sino-Indian War of 1962, and the Kargil Conflict of 1999.⁵ Beyond these, sustained counter-insurgency operations in J&K (since 1989) and the Northeast, and counter-terrorism actions have created continuous operational deployment requiring troops to engage in high-risk environments.⁶

The human cost is significant for these commitments. During counter-terrorism operations in J&K alone (1999-2006), Indian forces recorded 08.79 deaths per 1,000 troops deployed, with terrorist-induced injuries accounting for 08.16 deaths per 1,000 troops.⁷ The fatality-to-wounded ratio in these operations averaged 23.5 per cent, with 89.5 per cent of casualties ending in death before reaching the hospital. These statistics underscore both the intensity of engagements and the critical nature of injuries sustained by survivors.⁸

Defining War-Wounded Achievers

For this essay, 'War-Wounded Achievers' are defined as military personnel who:

- Sustained significant combat-related injuries, which resulted in permanent physical impairment or psychological trauma.
- Demonstrated measurable achievements or contributions during continued service or post-retirement.

- Received formal recognition through gallantry awards, institutional honours, or documented civilian accomplishments.
- Served as verified sources of inspiration for military personnel or civilian communities.

Case Studies of War-Wounded Achievers

The stories of war-wounded personnel showcase extraordinary courage and resilience. Many have turned their struggles into sources of inspiration, using their challenges as opportunities for growth both during service and after retirement. Their journeys illustrate how courage manifests not only in battles but in the sustained effort to rebuild, serve, and inspire others long after the guns fall silent.

Case Study 1: Major Devender Pal Singh (Retd)—Transforming Trauma into Hope

On 15 Jul 1999, a mortar blast in the Kargil sector left Major Devender Pal Singh with over 50 shrapnel pieces in his body and an amputated right leg. Declared clinically dead, he was revived through extraordinary medical intervention.⁹ Rather than succumb to despair, Major Singh transformed his trauma into a platform for inspiring others.

He became India's first blade runner, completing more than 26 half-marathons and pioneering para-athletics.¹⁰ In 2011, he founded 'The Challenging Ones' (TCO), a revolutionary Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) supporting over 1,600 amputees nationwide through sports-based rehabilitation and mental health advocacy.¹¹ TCO's motto, 'Turning the Challenged into Challengers', reflects Major Singh's core philosophy of transcending limitations.¹²

His mental health advocacy extends through corporate workshops focused on 'Positive Mental Health' and 'Resilience Building'. As a TEDx speaker and motivational consultant, Major Singh addresses Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), survivor's guilt, and identity reconstruction, sharing practical strategies developed during his own recovery journey.¹³ His autobiography *Grit: The Major Story* donates all proceeds to TCO, institutionalising his commitment to veteran welfare.¹⁴

Major Singh's work demonstrates how individual trauma, when channelled purposefully, creates sustainable support systems for fellow veterans. TCO now operates as a national network providing peer counselling, adaptive sports training, and community integration programmes directly addressing the mental health challenges that war-wounded personnel face during their recovery journey.

Case Study 2: Subedar Major (Honorary Captain) Yogendra Singh Yadav, PVC (Retd)—Service Beyond Sacrifice

At the age of 19, Grenadier Yogendra Singh Yadav sustained multiple gunshot wounds during the Tiger Hill assault in Jul 1999, yet continued fighting to secure this strategic objective.¹⁵ Remarkably, rather than seeking medical retirement, Sudedar Major Yadav chose to remain in service for 25 years, using his experience to mentor younger soldiers and advocate for veteran welfare.

After receiving the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest military decoration, Subedar Major Yadav dedicated his career to youth development and veteran advocacy.¹⁶ He served as an instructor, participated in Army Welfare Fund initiatives, and donated his entire INR 25 lakhs winnings from *Kaun Banega Crorepati* to military welfare causes.¹⁷ His post-retirement role as chief mentor at Good Day Defence School, Hanumangarh, focuses on instilling military values, leadership, and patriotism in aspiring defence personnel.¹⁸

Subedar Major Yadav's approach to mental health awareness centres on experiential learning, sharing battlefield psychology, trauma management and resilience-building techniques with both military and civilian audiences.¹⁹ His continued service exemplifies how war-wounded achievers can transform their survival experience into institutional knowledge, directly benefiting future generations of soldiers.

Subedar Major Yadav's quarter-century of post-injury service established a template for wounded warriors to remain active contributors rather than passive recipients of care. His mentorship programmes now influence hundreds of young Indians preparing for military careers, demonstrating how personal trauma can evolve into collective inspiration.

Case Study 3: Major General Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd)— Policy Pioneer for Disability Rights

When Major Ian Cardozo stepped on a landmine during the 1971 Bangladesh War, he performed self-amputation with his *khukri* (utility knife), declaring, “I cut my leg off and ordered, ‘Go and bury it’”.²⁰ This act of extreme agency defined not only his survival but his subsequent mission to transform institutional attitudes toward disability in military service.

Major General Cardozo became the first war-disabled officer to command both a battalion and a brigade, challenging conventional assumptions about combat effectiveness.²¹ His promotion to Major General demonstrated that physical disability need not curtail leadership potential when supported by institutional flexibility and personal determination.

Post-retirement, Major General Cardozo served as Chairperson of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) from 2005 to 2014, spearheading the formulation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act.²² His advocacy work focused on removing systemic barriers, promoting inclusive employment policies, and ensuring dignified rehabilitation for all disabled persons, and not just veterans. As Vice-President of the War Wounded Foundation, he established nationwide networks for peer support and policy advocacy.

Major General Cardozo’s institutional reforms created lasting policy frameworks that benefit thousands of war-wounded personnel annually. He demonstrated that disability and command authority are fully compatible, fundamentally altering military career progression policies. His legislative work also established legal protections that extended far beyond the armed forces into civilian society.

Comparative Analysis: Common Themes and Patterns of Resilience

The personal journeys of Major Devender Pal Singh, Subedar Major Yogendra Singh Yadav, and Major General Ian Cardozo reveal systematic patterns of resilience that transcend individual circumstances. Through comparative analysis, there are five critical emerging themes that explain how war-wounded personnel transform adversity into lasting achievement and institutional impact.

Theme 1: Institutional Support Systems and Their Effectiveness

The Indian Armed Forces' medical and rehabilitation infrastructure demonstrates both strengths and limitations in supporting war-wounded personnel. All three case studies benefited from immediate battlefield medical response and subsequent treatment at premier military medical facilities, Command Hospital, Udhampur (Major Singh), Army Hospital Research and Referral, Delhi (Subedar Major Yadav), and Military Hospital, Dhaka (General Cardozo).²³

The Armed Forces Medical Services framework provided structured rehabilitation through established institutions:

- Artificial Limb Centre, Pune, established in 1944, provides prosthetics and rehabilitation for over 2,000 personnel annually.²⁴
- Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centres at Kirkee, Pune, and Mohali offer comprehensive physical, psychological, and vocational rehabilitation.²⁵
- Command Hospitals are equipped with dedicated psychiatric departments and trauma counselling units.²⁶

However, analysis reveals significant gaps in long-term follow-up and community reintegration. While acute medical care was exemplary, sustained mental health support remained largely dependent on individual initiative and family resources. Major Singh's battle with PTSD, Subedar Major Yadav's adjustment to civilian life post-retirement, and Major General Cardozo's career navigation as a disabled officer required personal resilience beyond institutional programming.

Theme 2: Family Support Networks as Critical Enablers

Family systems emerged as the most consistent predictor of successful recovery across all three cases. The Government of India's Parliamentary Committee Report on Mental Health acknowledges that "Family support remains the primary psychosocial resource for military personnel recovering from combat trauma".²⁷ Research indicates that 87 per cent of successfully rehabilitated war-wounded personnel cite family support as the most significant recovery factor, surpassing institutional medical care or peer counselling in terms of importance.²⁸

Theme 3: Post-Traumatic Growth and Mission Redefinition

All three individuals demonstrated post-traumatic growth, a psychological phenomenon where individuals develop enhanced capabilities, relationships, and life purpose following traumatic experiences. Rather than merely returning to pre-injury baselines, each achieved higher levels of societal contribution than their pre-injury service records. Their transformation patterns were as follows:

- **Major Devender Pal Singh.** From infantry officer to national disability rights advocate and adaptive sports pioneer.
- **Subedar Major Yogendra Singh Yadav.** From individual soldier to institutional mentor, shaping military leadership development.
- **Major General Ian Cardozo.** From field commander to policy architect ,influencing national disability legislation.

This pattern aligns with resilience theory, which identifies ‘Meaning-making’ as a critical psychological process enabling trauma survivors to construct positive narratives from adverse experiences.²⁹ The armed forces regimental culture, emphasising duty, sacrifice, and service beyond self, provided a conceptual framework for these individuals to reinterpret their injuries as platforms for expanded national contribution.

Theme 4: Mental Health Awareness and Peer Support Networks

Each case study demonstrates the individual’s evolution from trauma recipient to trauma counsellor, creating sustainable peer support networks that extend institutional capacity. This pattern reflects the armed forces’ enhanced focus on mental health, with dedicated programmes including:

- Psychological first aid training for over 4,075 Air Force personnel, as of 2022.³⁰
- Indian Navy Strategy for Mental Health Assistance Resilience and Training (IN-SMART) implemented in 2022.³¹
- Toll-free suicide helplines operating 24X7 for all service branches.³²

Theme 5: Bridging Civil-Military Divides Through Lived Experience

War-wounded achievers serve as unique ambassadors between military and civilian communities, possessing combat credibility within the armed forces and inspirational narratives that resonate with civilian audiences. This dual identity enables them to:

- Educate civilian society about military sacrifice and veteran needs.
- Influence policy makers with first-hand experience of rehabilitation challenges.
- Mentor serving personnel with authentic understanding of combat trauma.
- Reduce stigma around disability and mental health in both military and civilian contexts.

The War-Wounded Foundation, established in 2002, demonstrates institutional recognition of this bridging function, supporting over 40,000 disabled personnel nationwide while advocating for policy reforms that benefit all disabled citizens.³³

This comparative analysis reveals that individual resilience is not purely a personal attribute, but emerges from the interaction between:

- Institutional frameworks (medical care, rehabilitation services, career policies).
- Social networks (family, peer groups, mentor relationships).
- Cultural narratives (military ethos, national service, post-traumatic growth).
- Policy environments (disability rights, veteran benefits, public recognition).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The Government of India's declaration of 2025 as the 'Year of Reforms' for the Ministry of Defence provides an unprecedented opportunity to institutionalise support systems for war-wounded achievers.³⁴ Based on the comparative analysis of resilience

patterns and existing policy frameworks, this section proposes five strategic interventions that can transform individual courage into systemic capacity for supporting wounded warriors.

Recommendation 1: Establishment of a National War-Wounded Achievers Documentation Archive

Current Gap. Despite the heroic contributions of war-wounded personnel, their stories remain fragmented across regimental records, personal accounts, and sporadic media coverage. No centralised repository exists for comprehensive documentation of their journeys from injury through achievement.

Solution. Create a Digital Archive of War-Wounded Achievers under the Directorate of Public Relations (Army) with the following components:

- **Comprehensive Life Histories.** Full biographical documentation from pre-service life through post-injury achievements, including family backgrounds, service records, injury circumstances, rehabilitation journeys, and subsequent contributions.
- **Audio-Visual Documentation.** Video interviews, photographic records, and multimedia presentations accessible to researchers, educators, and public.
- **Integration with Existing Platforms.** Link with the Gallantry Awards Portal (www.gallantryawards.gov.in) and Directorate General Resettlement databases for comprehensive veteran tracking.³⁵

Implementation Framework.

- **Pilot Phase (2025-26).** Document 100 verified war-wounded achievers across all three services.
- **Expansion Phase (2026-30).** Scale to include over 1,000 cases with dedicated research staff at each Command and Headquarters.
- **Accessibility.** Public portal with educational modules for schools, colleges, and military training institutions.

Expected Outcome. Systematic preservation of inspirational narratives for future generations while creating research resources for military psychology, rehabilitation studies, and veteran welfare policy development.

Recommendation 2: Integration of Mental Health Support with Family-Centric Rehabilitation

Current Gap. While the Indian Armed Forces have established psychological first aid training for more than 4,075 Air Force personnel and implemented IN-SMART³⁶, these programmes remain primarily service-member focused rather than family-system oriented.

Solution. Develop Integrated Family Rehabilitation Units at all major Commands Hospitals with the following capabilities:

- **Family Counselling Programs.** Mandatory psychological support for spouses, parents, and children of war-wounded personnel, recognising their critical role in successful recovery.
- **Peer Support Networks.** Formal mentorship programmes pairing newly injured personnel with established war-wounded achievers (e.g., Major Singh's TCO model scaled institutionally).

Resource Allocation.

- **Personnel.** Train over 500 family counsellors across Command Hospitals.
- **Infrastructure.** Establish dedicated family accommodation facilities at rehabilitation centres.
- **Technology.** Digital platforms for remote counselling and peer support networks.

Evidence Base. Research demonstrates that 87 per cent of successfully rehabilitated war-wounded personnel cite family support as the primary recovery factor³⁷, yet current policies provide minimal systematic family integration.

Recommendation 3: Structured Transition Support for Post-Service Achievement

Current Gap. The Directorate General Resettlement provides employment training and job placement services³⁸, but lacks specialised programming for war-wounded personnel whose unique experiences can contribute to national development beyond traditional employment.

Solution. Create a 'War-Wounded Achievers Transition Programme' with three distinct pathways:

- **Pathway 1: Institutional Leadership.**
 - **Reservation.** Reserved positions in Sainik Schools, Rashtriya Military Schools, and National Cadet Corps Directorates for war-wounded achievers as mentors and trainers.
 - **Policy Advisory Roles.** Formal representation on veteran welfare committees, rehabilitation policy boards, and military research councils.
- **Pathway 2: Entrepreneurship and Innovation.**
 - **Dedicated Startup Incubation.** INR 10 cr annual fund for war-wounded veteran enterprises, particularly in adaptive technology, rehabilitation services, and motivational consulting.
 - **Corporate Partnership Programme.** Formal memorandums of understanding with major corporations for leadership positions that leverage military experience and personal resilience narratives.
- **Pathway 3: Community Service and Advocacy.**
 - **NGO Leadership Development.** Training and funding support for establishing organisations like Major Singh's TCO.
 - **Public Speaking and Education Networks.** Professional development for war-wounded achievers as motivational speakers, with a standardised curriculum for schools and corporate training.

Recommendation 4: Enhanced Medical Rehabilitation Infrastructure

Current Gap. While institutions like the Artificial Limb Centre, Pune, and Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centres at Kirkee and Mohali provide medical care³⁹, they lack integration with psychological support and long-term achievement facilitation.

Solution. Establish Integrated Rehabilitation Nodes at each Command with comprehensive capabilities:

- **Medical Components.**
 - **Advanced Prosthetic Labs.** State-of-the-art facilities for custom prosthetics, including sport-specific equipment for adaptive athletics.
 - **Neuro-Psychological Units.** Dedicated departments combining trauma therapy, cognitive rehabilitation, and resilience training.
- **Achievement Facilitation Components.**
 - **Adaptive Sports Centres.** Training facilities for para-athletics, with coaching staff and equipment for competitive sports.
 - **Vocational Innovation Labs.** Technology-enabled skill development centres focusing on emerging fields like digital marketing, app development, and e-commerce.
- **Community Integration Components.**
 - **Mentor Matching Systems.** Formal programmes connecting new patients with established war-wounded achievers.
 - **Family Support Services.** Childcare, counselling, and educational support for families during extended rehabilitation periods.

Recommendation 5: Legislative and Policy Framework Enhancement

Current Gap. While Major General Ian Cardozo's leadership at the RCI (2005-14) contributed to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act⁴⁰, specific protections and advancement opportunities for war-wounded personnel remain limited.

Solution. War-Wounded Achievers Recognition and Support Act with the following provisions:

- **Legal Protections.**
 - **Employment Reservations.** Two per cent reservation in Group A and Group B government positions for war-wounded achievers with demonstrated post-injury contributions.
 - **Educational Benefits.** Full scholarship support for children of war-wounded personnel through postgraduate levels.
- **Recognition Mechanisms.**
 - **Annual National Awards.** Courage and Resilience Awards recognising exceptional post-injury achievements.
 - **Institutional Honours.** Mandatory representation of war-wounded achievers in Republic Day parades and national ceremonies.
 - **Memorial and Naming Rights.** Hospitals, roads, and institutions named after distinguished war-wounded achievers.
- **Implementation Oversight.**
 - **Parliamentary Committee.** Dedicated committee for war-wounded affairs with quarterly review sessions.
 - **Independent Monitoring.** Third-party evaluation of rehabilitation effectiveness and achievement facilitation.

Conclusion

The journey from battlefield to blade runner, from wounded warrior to policy pioneer, from trauma survivor to national inspiration, is not merely a tale of survival, but a blueprint for transformation. Many war-wounded achievers exemplify a profound truth that resonates far beyond military service—courage is not merely a momentary act of defiance against death, but a sustained commitment to life in the service of others.

Their stories validate the essay's core thesis that war scars, whether visible or invisible, need not define limitations but can become launching pads for extraordinary achievement. The comparative analysis reveals that resilience is not an individual attribute but an ecosystem outcome emerging from the dynamic interaction between institutional frameworks, family networks, cultural narratives, and policy environments.

The policy recommendations presented from comprehensive documentation archives to family-centric rehabilitation programmes represent more than administrative improvements. They constitute a national commitment to transform an individual's courage into collective capacity. As India faces an increasingly complex security environment, the wisdom embedded in these war-wounded achievers' experiences becomes strategically vital for institutional morale, public support for the armed forces, and national character building. Yet, perhaps the most significant insight emerging from these narratives concerns the multiplicative nature of resilience.

As Major Devender Pal Singh, drawing from the core teaching of the Sikh holy book, the *Gurbani*, reminds us, *Man Jeete, Jag Jeet* (Conquer the mind and you conquer the world).⁴¹

This ancient wisdom, lived through modern battlefields and contemporary rehabilitation centres, offers the ultimate lesson about courage and resilience—true victory lies not in avoiding wounds, but in transforming them into sources of strength that uplift entire communities.

The war-wounded achievers profiled in this essay have indeed conquered their minds, and in doing so, they have conquered worlds, not through dominance, but through service; not through individual triumph, but through collective empowerment. Their legacy challenges every Indian citizen to not just ask about the comfort that can be provided to wounded warriors, but what inspiration can be driven from their courage to build a more resilient, compassionate, and service-oriented society.

In honouring their journeys, the country honours their sacrifice, as well as the infinite potential that lies within every human being to transform adversity into achievement, trauma into triumph, and individual healing into national strength. Their scars have become inspiration; their resilience became collective courage.

Endnotes

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