

Caring For the War-Disabled: How Will Their Treatment Impact Future Recruitment

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“It was their concern for the country and its citizens that drove them to the battlefield. Now it’s the turn of the citizens”

-General VP Malik, PVSM, AVSM (Retd) at USI 2022 Seminar

Abstract

This essay explores the critical link between the care of war-disabled soldiers and the long-term sustainability of the Indian Armed Forces. While India’s military is globally respected for its valour, the invisible and visible wounds of its personnel returning from conflict often go under-addressed. This essay traces the historical evolution of care for disabled veterans in India, evaluates current medical, psychological, and economic rehabilitation programs, and identifies persisting challenges such as resource constraints, geographic disparities, and bureaucratic hurdles. It emphasises that the morale and retention of serving personnel, as well as the enlistment of new recruits, are deeply influenced by how the nation supports its war-disabled veterans. Drawing from global best practices—including models from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada—the essay recommends strategic enhancements in infrastructure, mental health

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services, vocational training, and administrative efficiency. In doing so, this essay underscores the importance of veteran care as both a moral responsibility and a strategic imperative.

Introduction

The Indian Armed Forces, esteemed for their bravery and unwavering commitment, play a crucial role in safeguarding the nation. However, the toll of war often manifests in the lives of soldiers who return as war-disabled veterans, carrying both visible and invisible wounds. These veterans deserve comprehensive support and care to aid their transition back to civilian life. The quality of care provided to war-disabled soldiers is not just a measure of the nation's gratitude but also a crucial factor in shaping future military recruitment. Prospective soldiers often consider how veterans are treated when making decisions about enlisting, making this issue integral to the armed forces' long-term sustainability. This essay delves into the history, current support systems, and challenges faced by war-disabled veterans in India, exploring the impact of these factors on the morale of active personnel and the decisions of potential recruits. By examining the connection between veteran care and recruitment, the discussion underscores the importance of addressing the needs of war-disabled soldiers to maintain the strength and future of the Indian Armed Forces.

Historical Context of War-Disabled in the Indian Armed Forces

The history of war-related disabilities within the Indian Armed Forces is closely linked with the country's military conflicts, from the post-Independence period to the present day. After gaining independence in 1947, India was soon engaged in a series of conflicts, beginning with the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947-48. This conflict, along with subsequent wars such as the Sino-Indian War in 1962, the Indo-Pakistani Wars in 1965 and 1971, the Kargil War in 1999, and ongoing counter-insurgency operations, resulted in many soldiers sustaining injuries that left them with long-term physical or psychological disabilities.

In the early years, care for war-disabled soldiers was relatively unorganised, with limited resources dedicated to their long-term rehabilitation. Medical care was largely confined to military hospitals, with less emphasis on comprehensive rehabilitation, social reintegration, or psychological support. As the scale of the

problem became clearer, both the Indian Government and the armed forces began to recognise the need for a more structured approach to support war-disabled personnel. The creation of the Armed Forces Medical Services (AFMS) marked a significant improvement in the care available to injured soldiers. Over time, the AFMS has developed into a sophisticated network that includes hospitals and rehabilitation centres. Notably, the Military Hospital system, which includes institutions like the Artificial Limb Centre (ALC) in Pune, has been crucial in providing prosthetic limbs and physical rehabilitation for those who have suffered limb loss in combat.

The 1971 Indo-Pakistani War was a turning point in the recognition of the need for more comprehensive policies to support war-disabled veterans. The aftermath of this conflict, which saw numerous casualties and injuries, prompted the government to introduce more structured rehabilitation and welfare programs. Various pension schemes and financial support measures were introduced, acknowledging that disabled veterans would need sustained assistance to lead dignified lives after their service. By the late 20th Century, awareness of the psychological effects of warfare led the Indian Armed Forces to place greater emphasis on mental health care. The experiences of veterans from the Kargil War, many of whom returned with both physical injuries and psychological trauma, highlighted the need for mental health services. This prompted the development of specialised programs aimed at treating conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), ensuring that war-disabled soldiers received more comprehensive care.

In recent years, the Indian Government has continued to refine its policies, introducing new measures such as the Disability Pension and War Injury Pension, which provide financial compensation based on the level of disability. Additionally, efforts have been made to improve access to care for veterans living in rural areas, though challenges remain.

Current Care and Rehabilitation Programs for War-Disabled in the Indian Armed Forces

The Indian Armed Forces have made significant strides in developing care and rehabilitation programs for war-disabled soldiers, recognising the importance of providing comprehensive

support to those who have sacrificed their physical and mental well-being in service to the nation. Over the years, these programs have evolved to address the multifaceted needs of disabled veterans, encompassing medical treatment, psychological support, social reintegration, and economic assistance.

Medical Care and Rehabilitation.

- Medical care for war-disabled personnel begins immediately after injury, with initial treatment often provided on the battlefield or in forward medical units. Once stabilised, injured soldiers are transferred to specialised military hospitals for further treatment. The AFMS play a crucial role in this process, operating a network of hospitals across the country, including premier institutions like the Army Hospital (Research and Referral) in New Delhi and the Command Hospital in Pune. A key component of medical care for war-disabled soldiers is physical rehabilitation. The ALC in Pune is a prominent facility that provides prosthetic limbs and other assistive devices to soldiers who have lost limbs in combat.
- In addition to the ALC, the Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centres in Pune and Mohali offer specialised care for soldiers with spinal cord injuries. These centres provide a range of services, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and vocational training, aimed at helping soldiers adapt to life with a disability and reintegrate into society.

Psychological Support and Mental Health Care. The psychological impact of combat can be profound, with many soldiers experiencing conditions such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety as a result of their experiences. The Indian Armed Forces have increasingly recognised the importance of addressing these issues and have developed mental health care programs to support war-disabled soldiers. In military hospitals, psychiatric departments are equipped to handle a range of mental health issues, offering both in-patient and out-patient services. Soldiers who require more specialised care may be referred to institutions like the Armed Forces Medical College in Pune, which has a dedicated psychiatry department that conducts research and provides treatment for a variety of mental health conditions.

Social and Economic Support.

- Beyond medical and psychological care, the rehabilitation of war-disabled soldiers involves ensuring their social and economic well-being. The Indian Government has established a range of schemes and benefits aimed at supporting disabled veterans and their families, recognising that financial stability is a crucial aspect of rehabilitation. The Disability Pension is one of the primary forms of financial support available to war-disabled veterans. This pension is granted based on the degree of disability and is designed to provide ongoing financial assistance to those who are unable to return to active duty due to their injuries. In cases of severe disability, soldiers may also be eligible for the War Injury Pension, which offers additional compensation to cover the costs associated with long-term care and support.
- Vocational training programs are another important aspect of social and economic support. These programs are designed to equip war-disabled soldiers with the skills they need to pursue alternative careers, particularly those who are unable to return to active military service. The Directorate General of Resettlement oversees these programs, offering courses in a variety of fields, from information technology to entrepreneurship. The aim is to help disabled veterans find meaningful employment and achieve financial independence.

Community and Family Support. The role of the community and family in the rehabilitation of war-disabled soldiers cannot be overstated. Recognising this, the Indian Armed Forces have developed programs that involve the families of disabled veterans in the rehabilitation process. Family members are often included in counselling sessions and are provided with information and resources to help them support their loved ones. This holistic approach ensures that the entire family is equipped to handle the challenges that come with a soldier's disability.

Challenges in Caring for War-Disabled Soldiers

Caring for war-disabled soldiers is a complex task that involves addressing a wide range of physical, psychological, social, and economic needs. Despite significant advancements in rehabilitation and support programs, several challenges persist in ensuring that

these veterans receive the comprehensive care they deserve. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing resource limitations, geographical disparities, social stigmas, and bureaucratic hurdles, all of which impact the effectiveness of care and the quality of life for disabled soldiers.

Resource Limitations. One of the primary challenges in caring for war-disabled soldiers is the limitation of resources. While the Indian Government and armed forces have made substantial investments in medical infrastructure, the demand for services often outpaces supply. Specialised medical facilities, such as those offering advanced prosthetic limbs or cutting-edge rehabilitation therapies, are limited in number and often concentrated in urban centres. This scarcity means that many disabled veterans, especially those in rural or remote areas, may struggle to access the care they need. Moreover, the costs associated with long-term rehabilitation can be prohibitive. Advanced medical treatments, ongoing physical therapy, and the need for specialised equipment like prosthetics can place a significant financial burden on the government and the veterans themselves. Although pensions and financial aid are available, they may not always be sufficient to cover all expenses, particularly for those with severe or multiple disabilities.

Geographical Disparities. Geographical disparities further complicate the care of war-disabled soldiers. Veterans living in rural or remote areas often face significant barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Specialised facilities are usually located in major cities, requiring veterans from distant regions to travel long distances for treatment. This not only adds to their physical and financial strain but also poses logistical challenges, especially for those with severe disabilities who may find travel difficult. These geographical challenges also extend to the availability of support services. Rural areas may lack the necessary infrastructure for psychological counselling, vocational training, and social reintegration programs. As a result, war-disabled soldiers in these areas may not receive the comprehensive care that is more readily available to their urban counterparts, leading to disparities in recovery outcomes and quality of life.

Social Stigma and Mental Health. Social stigma remains a significant challenge, particularly in the context of mental health care for war-disabled soldiers. In many cultures, including parts of

India, there is a lingering stigma attached to mental illness, which can prevent soldiers from seeking the help they need. Within the military, where strength and resilience are highly valued, admitting to psychological difficulties such as PTSD or depression can be seen as a sign of weakness, further discouraging soldiers from accessing mental health services. This stigma is compounded by a lack of awareness and understanding about mental health issues among the general population and even within the military itself.

Bureaucratic Hurdles and Administrative Challenges.

- Bureaucratic hurdles present another significant challenge in the care of war-disabled soldiers. Navigating the complex web of paperwork and procedures required to access benefits and services can be overwhelming for veterans and their families. The process of applying for disability pensions, medical treatment, and other forms of support often involves extensive documentation, which can be particularly burdensome for those dealing with severe physical or mental disabilities.
- In some cases, delays in processing applications can result in veterans waiting months or even years to receive the support they are entitled to. These delays can have serious consequences, particularly for those who rely on financial assistance to cover the costs of ongoing medical treatment or who need timely access to rehabilitation services. Efforts to streamline administrative processes and reduce bureaucratic red tape are essential to ensuring that war-disabled soldiers receive the care they need in a timely manner.

Impact of Care on Morale and Retention

The quality of care provided to war-disabled soldiers plays a critical role in shaping the morale and retention rates within the Indian Armed Forces. Soldiers who witness the comprehensive and compassionate treatment of their injured comrades are more likely to remain committed to their service, confident that their own well-being will be prioritised should they face similar circumstances. Conversely, inadequate care can lead to decreased morale, reduced trust in the military institution, and ultimately, higher attrition rates.

Boosting Morale through Comprehensive Care. Morale is a key factor in the effectiveness and cohesion of any military unit. Soldiers are more willing to take on difficult and dangerous tasks if they believe that their institution values them and will take care of them and their families in times of need. When soldiers see that their injured comrades receive high-quality medical treatment, psychological support, and assistance with reintegration into civilian life, it reinforces their sense of loyalty and trust in the organisation. This assurance that the military will stand by them, no matter the circumstances, significantly boosts their morale, making them more resilient in the face of adversity.

Retention through Assurance of Care. Retention of skilled and experienced personnel is crucial for maintaining the effectiveness of the armed forces. When soldiers are confident that their health, well-being, and future are secure, they are more likely to commit to long-term service. The assurance of comprehensive care in the event of injury or disability is a significant factor in this decision-making process. If soldiers perceive that war-disabled veterans are neglected or face difficulties in accessing the care they need, it can lead to uncertainty and anxiety among the ranks. This fear of being abandoned in the event of an injury can cause soldiers to reconsider their commitment to the military, leading to increased attrition rates. In contrast, when the armed forces are seen as providing reliable and effective support for injured soldiers, it strengthens the bond between the military and its personnel, encouraging more soldiers to stay in service.

Trust in the Institution. Trust in the military institution is foundational to both morale and retention. Soldiers need to believe that the organisation they serve will protect and support them in all circumstances. The care provided to war-disabled soldiers is a tangible demonstration of this trust. When soldiers observe that their injured comrades are well cared for, it reinforces their belief in the military's commitment to their well-being. This trust extends beyond the individual to their families, who also need to feel assured that the military will provide for them if their loved ones are injured or killed in service.

Influence on Future Recruitment

The treatment and care provided to war-disabled soldiers have a significant influence on the future recruitment of personnel into the Indian Armed Forces. The perception of how the military treats

its wounded veterans directly impacts the willingness of young people to enlist, as well as the support of their families, who play a crucial role in the decision-making process.

Perception of the Military's Commitment. Prospective recruits often consider the long-term implications of joining the armed forces, including the risks of injury and disability. When they see that the military offers comprehensive and respectful care to its war-disabled soldiers, it reassures them that their well-being will be prioritised in case they face similar challenges. This perception enhances the appeal of military service as a viable career option, where individuals can feel secure in the knowledge that their sacrifices will be honoured and that they will not be left to fend for themselves if injured.

Influence on Families. Families are key influencers in the recruitment process, particularly in a country like India, where close-knit family structures often play a central role in major life decisions. When families observe that war-disabled veterans receive robust medical care, psychological support, and financial assistance, they are more likely to support their children's decision to join the armed forces. Conversely, if they perceive that the military neglects its injured personnel, families may discourage enlistment, fearing for the future security and well-being of their loved ones.

Attracting Quality Recruits. The armed forces seek to attract not just any recruits but those who are highly motivated, skilled, and committed. The treatment of war-disabled soldiers serves as a reflection of the military's values and ethics. When the military is seen as an institution that genuinely cares for its personnel, it attracts recruits who share those values and are more likely to serve with dedication. This, in turn, ensures a higher calibre of recruits, who are driven not only by the desire to serve their country but also by the confidence that they will be supported throughout their military career.

Case Studies: Global Perspectives on Care for War-Disabled Soldiers

Examining global case studies provides valuable insights into best practices for caring for war-disabled soldiers. Different countries have adopted various models to support their veterans, reflecting

cultural, political, and historical contexts. Notable examples include the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada, each of which has implemented comprehensive programs for the rehabilitation and reintegration of their war-disabled personnel.

The United States. The US has a long-standing commitment to the care of its veterans, enshrined in the establishment of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) after World War I. The VA provides a wide range of services, including health care, mental health support, vocational training, and housing assistance. A notable program is the VA's Adaptive Sports Program, which encourages participation in adaptive sports as a means of rehabilitation and social reintegration. This initiative not only aids physical recovery but also fosters camaraderie among veterans, helping them rebuild their identities after service. The emphasis on holistic care, combining physical, mental, and social support, has led to improved outcomes for veterans and serves as a model for other nations.

The United Kingdom. In the UK, the Ministry of Defence has developed a robust framework for the care of injured personnel through initiatives such as the Defence Recovery Capability. This program focuses on providing tailored support to wounded service members, facilitating their recovery and transition back to civilian life. One successful aspect is the establishment of Recovery Centres, which offer comprehensive rehabilitation services, including physical therapy, psychological support, and vocational training. The UK's emphasis on integrating wounded veterans into the workforce and society illustrates a commitment to not only treating injuries but also ensuring long-term well-being and employment opportunities.

Canada. Canada's approach to caring for war-disabled soldiers emphasises the importance of mental health support. The Canadian Armed Forces has implemented the 'Operational Stress Injury' program, which addresses psychological conditions stemming from military service, such as PTSD. This program provides access to mental health professionals and support groups, fostering a culture of openness around mental health issues. Additionally, VA Canada offers various benefits, including financial assistance and vocational rehabilitation, ensuring that veterans receive the necessary resources for a successful transition to civilian life.

Recommendations for Improving Care and Recruitment of War-Disabled Soldiers

Improving the care and recruitment of war-disabled soldiers in the Indian Armed Forces is essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness of the military while ensuring that veterans receive the support they deserve. The following recommendations aim to address the existing challenges and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for both current personnel and future recruits:

- **Enhance Medical Infrastructure.** Investing in medical facilities and resources dedicated to the care of war-disabled soldiers is critical. This includes upgrading existing military hospitals, expanding the reach of specialised rehabilitation centres, and ensuring that state-of-the-art medical technologies and treatments are accessible to all veterans. Establishing more ALCs and Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centres across the country will help provide timely and effective care to those in need, particularly in rural areas.
- **Strengthen Mental Health Support.** Recognising the psychological impact of combat is vital. The military should prioritise mental health services by increasing the number of trained mental health professionals and integrating psychological care into all levels of medical treatment. Awareness campaigns aimed at reducing stigma around mental health issues should be implemented to encourage soldiers to seek help. Creating peer support networks can also foster a sense of community among veterans and promote mental well-being.
- **Streamline Administrative Processes.** Simplifying the bureaucratic procedures for accessing benefits and services is essential for ensuring timely support for war-disabled soldiers. This can be achieved by digitising records and applications, allowing for easier navigation through the system. Training personnel in administrative offices to handle veteran-related cases efficiently will help reduce wait times and improve the overall experience for veterans seeking assistance.

- **Expand Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities.** To facilitate the reintegration of war-disabled soldiers into civilian life, the military should enhance vocational training programs that align with current job market demands. Collaborating with industries to create specialised training programs will equip veterans with the necessary skills to find meaningful employment. Additionally, establishing partnerships with private companies for preferential hiring of veterans can further aid in their transition.
- **Foster Family Involvement.** Involving families in the care and rehabilitation process is crucial. Offering family counselling services and support groups can help families better understand and cope with the challenges faced by their injured loved ones. Providing resources for families will not only assist in the emotional well-being of the veteran but also encourage families to support enlistment in the armed forces.
- **Promote Awareness and Outreach Programs.** Conducting outreach programs in schools, colleges, and communities can help raise awareness about the opportunities and benefits of a career in the armed forces. Highlighting the comprehensive care and support provided to veterans can positively influence perceptions and encourage more individuals to consider military service. Engaging with local communities through events and information sessions can also foster a sense of pride and support for the armed forces.
- **Leverage Technology for Rehabilitation.** Incorporating technology into rehabilitation programs can significantly enhance the quality of care for war-disabled soldiers. Telehealth services can facilitate remote consultations for veterans living in remote areas, providing them with access to specialists without the need for travel. Virtual reality therapy and other innovative rehabilitation techniques can also be explored to aid in the recovery process and improve engagement.

Conclusion

Caring for war-disabled soldiers is not only a moral imperative but also a crucial factor in maintaining the effectiveness and sustainability of the Indian Armed Forces. The treatment and support provided to injured personnel directly influence morale, retention rates, and future recruitment, shaping the military's overall reputation and appeal. By examining global best practices and addressing the challenges faced by war-disabled veterans in India, significant improvements can be made to enhance their quality of life.

Implementing comprehensive medical and psychological care, streamlining administrative processes, and expanding vocational training opportunities will ensure that veterans receive the support they need to reintegrate successfully into civilian life. Furthermore, fostering family involvement and promoting awareness of military service can positively impact recruitment, attracting motivated individuals to serve their country.

Endnotes

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