



Sideline soldiers

Ex-Staff Sergeant H.K. Dayaratne, President of the Association of Disabled Ex-Service Personnel is now fighting for the well-being of the disabled servicemen of the war. Shyamal A. Collure reports...

When the LTTE attacked the sacred city of Anuradhapura on May 14, 1985, they left a trail of carnage. Brought in as reinforcements, certain Army units pursued the enemy on ground as well as in the air. Staff Sergeant H.K. Ashoka Dayaratne, seated on the side of a helicopter flying over the jungle, was hit by two bullets on his right arm and left leg. He escaped death by hair's breadth thanks to the presence of mind

of his colleagues. Staff Sergeant Ashoka Dayaratne stepped into *The Sunday Times* office recently sans his military uniform, the T-56 and his right arm. He had several heart-rending stories of ex-servicemen to tell the country. Dayaratne, along with his colleagues who had met with similar or worse mishaps, formed the Association of Disabled Ex-service Personnel (A.D.E.P.) in June, 1994. He is the President

of this Association which currently has about 3000 members. **Finance** Finance is a major problem confronting the disabled ex-service personnel. We are paid a compensation, full salary up to the age of retirement (55) and pension thereafter. However, this payment becomes insufficient in the light of heavy medical expenses - disorderly family life etc. To give a typical example, there

is one of our members who lives in a small village off Rambukkana. He is an ex-policeman drawing a monthly salary of only Rs. 3,100 a month. This poor man is lifeless below the neck and has been confined to bed for the last six years. His daily medical expenses amount to Rs. 225 and once a week or so he has to be taken to the Rambukkana Hospital, for which a vehicle has to be hired. Since his parents are very old, he is being looked after by his sister who didn't even marry because of him. I know very well that the family has to find Rs. 5,000 extra each month to meet his medical expenses," he said.

Dayaratne went on to say that he had also written to the principals of all leading schools in Colombo requesting them to take in at least one child from the families of disabled ex-servicemen. "We are not asking for the moon. This is something that can easily be done. For example, if there are 15 big schools in Colombo, they can take 15 children from such families. I sent copies of these letters to the President, Deputy Minister of Defence and Minister of Education too. I don't know whether you'll believe me, but I haven't received even an acknowledgement letter from any of them up to date," a deeply hurt Dayaratne told *The Sunday Times*.

Staff Sergeant H. K. Dayaratne (Top), and the AGM of the Association (Above and far right) Pts. by Ranjith Perera

Abilities The Association organises an annual event called "Abilities" at which the skills of disabled ex-service personnel are displayed. Various products that take shape at the hands of its members throughout the year are sold here. "Abilities '94" Mid City, was held at the Women's International Club, Colombo last year. The venue will be the same for "Abilities '95" as well. According to Dayaratne, Mr. Lucky Peris, Chairman - Rotary Club (Mid City) and Ms. Jean Samuel, Director of the International Human Rights Project extend their fullest co-operation to make this annual event a success. The less fortunate members of the Association are often visited by the more fortunate ones who can somehow move about. Recently, a wheel-chair and some commode sets donated by the Kobekkaduwa Fund were distributed among the needy. "Mr. and Ms. Shan Wickremasinghe donated eleven artificial limbs to us to commemorate the late Mr. Esmond Wickremasinghe's death anniversary. We gifted them to the Army. We regularly visit the inmates of the Military Hospital with gift parcels and do not forget to have a long chat with them to give them moral support. As we intend expanding our activities, we appeal to true patriots to write to us or contact us," Dayaratne said. The Association functions from an office at No. 453/1, Havelock Road, Colombo 6.

Facilities Born and educated in Jaffna, Dayaratne joined the Army in 1972. He took part in the civil operation carried out by Brigadier Tissa Weeraratne in 1979. Dayaratne is bitter about the lack of facilities afforded to the disabled servicemen. In his capacity as the President of the Association of Disabled Ex-

service Personnel, he had requested the Minister of Transport, Sri Lanka, to issue a pass, be issued and a seat in poolside buses be reserved for disabled ex-servicemen. This proposal was turned down due to financial restraints. Recently he also wrote to the Minister of Education, Richard Pathirana about the wife of a blind member of his Association. The woman in question had been teaching voluntarily for the past ten years. According to Dayaratne, she should have been given a permanent job even on merit. But unfortunately this was not to be.

"During the J. Jayewardene regime, those who were injured in action were looked after well. Unfortunately, the rate of payment has not been raised since. If everybody here enjoys freedom because of our men in the North and East, then there should be a special system to look after them. They must be helped in every possible way to usefully plan out their future. It was with this idea that I formed the Association," said Dayaratne. He claimed that it was not the politicians or self-appointed intellectuals but his brothers-in-arms who had the supreme right to talk about the war. According to him, every political party and politician in power since the dawn of Independence is responsible for the ongoing war. A heap of false promises was given to Tamils in a bid to grab power. It was because of this and the tug-of-war of the two major political parties that the youth coming from remote villages have had to pay the penalty. The war is being used by politicians for their mere survival. The most immediate victims of this are the service personnel," he stated with emotion. "The soldier does not belong to any particular political party. He takes an oath to serve any democratically elected government. The government knows that once an order is given to him, he carries it out to the very letter. What generally happens is that politicians use service personnel as pawns to reach their narrow ends. Some are even taken to courts and punished when a new government assumes office. How can we perform our duties in these circumstances? Moreover, it strengthens the enemy," Dayaratne said. "The war can still be won, if politicians stop meddling and gracefully withdraw from it. No officer running after money and promotions too can successfully lead the war. A war council must be set up, entrusting the task of wiping out terrorism to it. This war council should function either from Anuradhapura or Vavuniya and definitely not from Colombo," he suggested.

If these 'testwhile heroes of the battle-field' continue to live in our memory even in their retirement, then the numerous sacrifices they have made will not have been in vain.