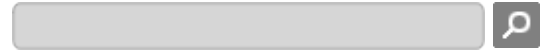


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Nothing is impossible

VIEWS (7215)



Nobody knew his name. He had no money. But he wanted to be a recognized person in society.

This is the inspiring story of Major Nissanka Senadhipathi, a man who defines courage, discipline and determination.

In 1996, following 11 years' service in the Sri Lanka Army, he took on the challenge of establishing his own security firm - Avant-Garde Security Services. Overcoming inconceivable hardships and facing daunting challenges on a daily basis, Senadhipathi is today the chairman of the most comprehensive and best-trained security company in Sri Lanka. He illustrates the reality that nothing is impossible, keeping with the motto of his regiment - the Army Commandos.

I Your background is in the Sri Lanka Army. Can you talk about your decision to enter the army and your achievements there?

My father, a simple man, was a sergeant major in the police. He was a disciplinarian and was able to direct me during my younger days, together with the support of my mother. I was greatly influenced by their joint effort to bring up my two sisters, my brother and myself.

I joined the Sri Lanka Army at a most crucial hour when the civil war had just begun. It was a time when no mother wanted to send her son to the armed forces and my parents too were dead against the idea. Yet I wanted to be a man among men. I also loved the uniform and I was eager to command people. The army is the best place in the world for anyone to be a man, and to do what others may even consider impossible. The regiment I joined was the Commandos and their motto is 'nothing is impossible'. We were taught to live without fear and to fight for the country and its sovereignty and never betray. We only had our soldiers beside us and with unity, we fought for the country.

I was the fourth in my batch, out of 57 and we were trained in Pakistan for almost a year. Once we passed out, there was only one vacancy to join the Commandos, but we had 22 applicants. I was the one who was selected. I was the first officer to join the Commandos directly. There were around 14 officers and 360 men during the initial Commando training but only myself, another officer and 46 soldiers were selected in the first batch. The Commando's job involves juggling life and death because you can never say 'no' to any task; at any debacle, our task was to rescue men in danger. You never knew whether you would return alive. I loved the challenge of being able to do what others couldn't.

"The army is the best place in the world for anyone to be a man, and to do what others may even consider impossible. The regiment I joined was the Commandos and their motto is 'nothing is impossible'. We were taught to live without fear and to fight for the country and its sovereignty and never betray."

It required intensive training and we were taught to accept hardships under whatever the condition and to never give up. For example, we had to run 36 miles with 50 pounds of sand in our backpacks within five-and-a-half hours in full battle order. Some were exhausted and collapsed. We also had to walk 150 miles through jungle, on what is termed a three-day march, without any rest with backpacks weighing 80 pounds.

I served in the army for 11 years where I was exposed to a variety of different duties that not everyone has had the opportunity of doing. Since I was in the top level in my batch, I could have joined any regiment, including accepting a post that was away from the battlefields, but I wanted to fight for my country, which I did under the first command regiment under Lt Col S D Peiris. However, I also had an opportunity to learn about VVIP security working as bodyguard for certain cabinet ministers. At one time I was the personal bodyguard to the Commander of the IPKF (Indian Peace Keeping Force) and later, the personal bodyguard to Presidents, which is a great honor for any army officer. In addition, I was a team commander of the anti-hijacking unit and I was deployed at the Katunayake international airport for a period of one year. I was an officer instructor in the Military Academy of Diyatalawa and trained 100 officers to the army. Moreover, I have followed many courses in foreign countries and was trained under the Mossad too. My last appointment was as the chief security coordinator of the Ministry of Defense and the army headquarters.

I What inspired you to establish your own security firm and what challenges did you initially face in this respect?

The day I left the army in 1996, I stepped outside the gate hoping to take a trishaw home. However, when I checked my pockets, I had only Rs12, and no savings in the bank. I returned home by bus but made a promise to myself that I would someday own a successful business.

My partner (an ex-army officer but no longer in the business) and I founded Avant-Garde Security Services on July 7, 1996. I consider my lucky number to be seven, it is the date I was born, the date I joined the army,

the date I started my business, and even my home address is seven.

To recruit employees at the very outset, I held the job interviews in Pannipitiya at a roadside bakery with a makeshift table and benches. We began with only 15 Commandos who all resided in my home. My mother used to cook for them and I would deliver the food when they were on duty. I was the organization's managing director, accountant, marketing manager, visiting officer, and even the security guard when there were no personnel available. I bought a 50cc motorcycle with a loan and traveled from Kurunegala to Colombo every morning for six months. I rode in the hot sun and heavy rain, even when I was ill, resting by the roadside and using public lavatories in unfamiliar neighborhoods. I later bought a vehicle and used to live in it for three to four days at a time. There were times when I had no money to have my meals so I had to leave my wristwatch behind and collect it when I could pay the money.

Our first job was as security personnel for the Carlton Club but we stepped away from that kind of industry. Then we obtained the business of the EAP Edirisinghe group, followed by the Edna group of companies and Dialog GSM.

Despite new opportunities, the company was making huge losses of almost Rs1.5 million because I didn't know how to maintain proper accounts and run the administration. I didn't even know how to cross a bank check. Today, I'm proud to say that my knowledge is equivalent to an accountant and a lawyer.

One night, feeling simply blank, I was to give up my business with no idea of what I would do. But that night I remembered the motto of my regiment 'nothing is impossible and never to give up'.

With renewed allegiance, I mortgaged my house with which I paid off my debts and started afresh. I worked even harder, reading about management practices and sometimes living in my vehicle for six days at a time. We gradually expanded as people began to learn about Avant-Garde Security.

I Were there any individuals who made a significant impact in your life?

Mrs Soma Edirisinghe is a very important person in my life. She was almost like a mother and helped me when no one else was willing to. People viewed Avant-Garde as a group of ex-soldiers who were trying to run a security business and there were many other security firms already established at that time. I had no money and I was not from Colombo so nobody knew me. Yet without knowing our capabilities, Mrs Edirisinghe hired us to provide security for the entire EAP Edirisinghe group. In turn, she realized my dedication. When work is given, I don't sleep or eat until I finish it; I don't postpone my work. If something is wrong, I say, "Aunty, this is wrong"; I never bluff her.

With the support of such a large conglomerate, people began to recognize the company and Mrs Edirisinghe also introduced Avant-Garde to other corporate clients. One such person is Dr Hans Wijayasuriya, CEO of Dialog GSM who still remains as my first referee and who has promoted me to other people on many occasions. He was a great assistance in building my business. To date, my relationship with him is very cordial and my company acts with the feeling that it is a part of Dialog GSM. In addition, Ms Anoja Obeysekera, Head Legal (Air, CDL, HR & Admin) and Mr Nushad Perera, Head of Sales & Marketing Division, both of Dialog GSM and Mr Lal Edirisinghe, Chairman, Edna group of companies, have been a wonderful support in establishing my company. These are names that I will never forget in my life. That is how my business grew and today I am extremely grateful to all of them for the support they continue to provide.

I Can you describe the operations of your security firm? What areas of security do you handle and what services do you offer?

Avant-Garde Security is not based on tediously opening and closing gates. The public is actually unaware about the range of services we undertake for both the private and government sectors. Our team is experienced and flexible, capable of facing any circumstance. Clients hire us as professionals to take care of security and our aim is to ensure that the customer is free of all unnecessary worries in order to run their organization or event. We combat those offenders who threaten and demand ransom from our clients.

We provide customary services such as security for companies, prominent personalities and high-profile events as well as a cash-in-transit facility of cash and debt collection. In addition, we handle the management of certain large Sri Lankan companies, because they believe in the disciplined army system that we endorse. By controlling the in and out flow of large corporates, we are responsible for merchandise worth billions of rupees.

Our team faces some fateful situations like when dealing with union uprisings and labor strikes in factories outside Colombo. The workers threaten the management, burn vehicles and destroy property but the Police generally don't get involved because of political concerns. As a result of the selfish behavior of a few unruly employees, a profitable factory may be destroyed and hundreds of jobs may be lost. Avant-Garde strives to prevent and resolve such clashes. We're the only security provider to go head on with entire villages comprising thousands of civilians. We are prepared to face any situation.

Avant-Garde supplies the security, with 100-200 strong teams, for all international cricket matches played throughout Sri Lanka. We were especially recognized by the International Cricket Council (ICC) for our work during the ICC Champions Trophy series in 2003. Tony Greig has personally given us worldwide recognition by mentioning my company's good services during a TV interview in connection with the match series. We are also involved in the annual Royal-Thomian cricket matches, a sports series that no security firm wishes to touch because of the political personalities present.

We have also handled a variety of entertainment shows, starting with the Indian artistes who performed in Sri Lanka about six years ago and more recently, the UB40 and Bryan Adams concerts. A unique case was 'Millennium 2000', a musical show organized by the EAP Edirisinghe group, where 250,000 guests gathered at the Galle Face Green. There were 400 Avant-Garde men who had trained for a month in preparation for this event, and the support of the armed forces. There was not one security problem. With such large-scale events, we are involved in the ticketing, ushering and crowd control. Psychologically, our men possess a commanding image so people automatically behave appropriately. We are not unnecessarily violent; we speak diplomatically with people. However, we handle troublemakers in a different manner.

The persona of Avant-Garde, like myself, seems resolutely tough. However, along with the aggressive and forceful side, is a compassionate and large-hearted one. The company is a security provider to schools, hotels, hospitals, and offices. We have been serving Royal College for many years as well as St Thomas' College where we help maintain security. Our men even handle sensitive scenarios like if a little boy misses his bus and cries because he has no way to go home, we contact his family and drop him home. Sometimes youngsters play pranks or attempt to leave the premises by jumping over the walls. In such cases, we talk to them and help them understand the importance of good behavior and an education.

Moreover, our company maintains a sound rapport with various authorities and enterprises, including the armed forces. Our Public Relations (PR) enable us to surpass any barriers that our clients might face, be it for official or unofficial work. Sometimes bureaucratic procedures can hinder a client's business so we act as facilitators, intervening and speaking to the relevant groups. After all, new enterprises are a benefit to the nation in terms of investment and employment generation. In other cases, if someone has a problem whilst on holiday, if it is in Hambantota or Anuradhapura, they can contact us and a team will be dispatched to do the needful. We even travel overseas for clients, whether it is to obtain something from another country or take something valuable to them while they are on the move.

Avant-Garde runs a two-tier sophisticated intelligence system. We primarily gather information via our reliable contacts, the internet, journals, and newspapers, on daily events occurring nationally and around the world to update our clients. We brief them about political situations in the US and Sri Lanka, about any major attack or robbery, etc, particulars they do not have the time to find out about. Our clients are highly educated and cannot be deceived so we are conscientious about our sources and data collection. Secondly, we have a special intelligence division, known as the 'Deep Cover' operation, which employs international security techniques to find out specific details for a client.

I What is your professional modus operandi and style of leadership?

Today, the model of administration adopted by our company is what I learned from the Sri Lanka Army. Military leadership is unlike any other. One has to make a decision at the most crucial moment, a second too early or late, can result in the demise of hundreds of soldiers. When chaos is all around you, with the thought of a sniper attack at any time, with the possibility of losing a limb to a mortar, and with death and destruction everywhere, you have to command and fight the battle. I am who I am today because of the army.

“Today, the model of administration adopted by our company is what I learned from the Sri Lanka Army. Military leadership is unlike any other. One has to make a decision at the most crucial moment, a second too early or late, can result in the demise of hundreds of soldiers.”

To be a leader, the army says that you have to be an example. I have undertaken every job in this firm. No one can tell me about how difficult or how easy a guard's job is because I've worn the uniform and carried out the duties. I don't like to listen to the words 'no' and 'cannot'. My men respect me and follow my leadership because of my pragmatic approach where I lead from the front. Today, many have failed because their leadership was only words, not action.

The success of our company lies in how we treat our customers and our line of communication. We treat everyone equally, whether it is a huge corporation or an individual. In security, the most important element is to be in contact. We run a 24-hour operation on the ground and our phone lines are permanently manned. Furthermore, I never switch off my mobile phones and am always online to make decisions, whether it is for a client or my men. Our response to attend to any matter is immediate. I have no barricades for anyone to visit me, from a beggar to an employee to the topmost cabinet minister to the CEO of a group of companies. That is the failure of other establishments where as the businesses grow, it becomes more difficult for even a manager to meet the chairman.

I Can you talk about your team?

My brother is the Managing Director of the company and he was in the Sri Lanka Air Force. I have the strength of my regiment and my training. My men are dedicated, unafraid and are prepared for any mission. They are the pillars of the company. The majority of my team is from the cream of the Sri Lankan armed forces such as the Commandos, Special Forces, Special Boat Services from the Navy, and STF. I believe in discipline, which is taught comprehensively in the army. We give preference to men from the armed forces because it is hard to teach civilians such rigorous discipline and it takes time.

We utilize the best of equipment including a superior vehicle fleet especially for the VVIPs; we have the best bike squadron in the country, and we have the latest electronic tools and bugging devices. Our men are always in contact with each other, the headquarters and myself via mobile communication.

Our personnel can be found at strategic points on ground during the day and night. Not all of our guards wear uniforms; many of our special members are in civilian attire.

My team and I share a strong bond. We mutually trust and respect each other; there is a sense of solidarity and loyalty. If there is a problem, I do not push my team to face the situation, I take on the burden. If any of my men are wrongly treated by undue elements, I confront the respective faction, regardless of the cost and who it is, in order to treat them accordingly.

Avant-Garde pays the best salaries to our employees because we believe in recognizing excellent work. Our insurance cover is unlike any other local security firm. 250 of our special bodyguards are insured for Rs750,000 each. Whether they die on the job or at home, their families will be duly paid. In the armed forces, a family receives only Rs75,000 and only if the soldier dies in battle.

I What sort of screening and training does your staff regularly undergo in order to ensure the correct conduct?

Since most of my staff consists of ex-officers from the army, navy and police, we are able to access their personal records before hiring or sending them on a key mission.

We spend a lot of funds on training, which is the best in the country. We have a training department headed by a dedicated training manager. We conduct physical and refresher courses, on-the-job training, covert operation activities, firearm and VVIP security training. We have a day session once a month to train our management staff. I believe we are the only security company to carry out such training.

In addition, every three months, we conduct specialized, high-risk training, which is very expensive, for 60 of our best men at a seven-day camp in Kalpitiya. We follow the Israeli Mossad security training and I personally demonstrate many of the tricky maneuvers. The Defense Ministry only teaches shotgun use but we instruct our men on how to fire from moving vehicles and fire at a moving target while riding 250cc bikes. Upon completion, they have to sit for an exam.

I What guiding principles have you followed to achieve success in this extraordinary line of business?

I am a man of principles and if a promise is made, I ensure that I accomplish it at whatever the cost. Integrity, discipline, respect and punctuality are the foundation of my organization. If I tell someone I will meet him at a particular time, I try never to be late, but if I am, I call ahead and excuse myself. If we make a mistake, we address it. We don't bluff others and thus we have created loyal Avant-Garde customers.

Today customer expectation is very high; they expect severe discipline. Security companies cannot survive if they do not recognize and cater to those needs. People select my company because of our discipline, a quality I learned in the army. Discipline is not about saluting and marching, it involves every aspect, from the way you talk to people and conduct yourself to the way you eat and drink. Even if an employee is the best officer from the Delta Force of the US Army, if he isn't disciplined, he will not be entertained in my company.

Money is not everything to my business. This is a highly labor intensive operation. Therefore the returns are low. However, we have the satisfaction of assisting and feeding so many families of our employees. We are their caregivers.

We take pride in the service we provide and in keeping our clients safe and happy. Letters of acknowledgement and gratitude mean more to me than money. With our loyalty and good work, customers become our sponsors by talking about our kind gestures and reliable service, thereby bringing us new businesses that may be worth so much more. In this manner, we develop strong relationships with our customers.

I practice what the Lord Buddha preached, particularly about helping the underprivileged. Although we spend a lot each month on the needy, we never publicize our humanitarian commitments. I strongly believe that the more I give, the more business that will come my way.

I also feel that it is my duty to ensure that society is free of undue elements to continue with their lives and businesses trouble-free. Security is a vital element, along with the basics of food, air, water and shelter, in any part of the world. After all, if you are not alive and well, you cannot do anything.

I How have you played a role in changing perceptions of the security business as a menial job?

As a result of certain people who have entered this field with inadequate knowledge and offer a low level of service, security companies have been looked down upon. Guards were treated as cheap laborers, second or third class citizens. Today, I'm proud to say that, despite the challenges, I've changed that negative image of security in Sri Lanka. The public strongly believes in our necessity and they can sleep peacefully at night. The security service is the only trustworthy force that will stand for a company's management or a family

until the very end, even in times of crisis.

Security is an ever-changing and unpredictable sector. This is evident by the 9/11 attacks on New York City's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which is considered the best-defended location in the world with air defense missile systems and billions of dollars spent on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to protect those places. Another case in point is the assassination of the former Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin who was protected by the Israeli police and the Mossad, which is respected as the best worldwide intelligence service. With all this, a young law student who had no military background shot him dead with a 9mm. The security service is also an unorthodox industry where there are no set rules but only basics. If the global situation changes, our systems change. For instance, if you introduce a system to curb one type of burglary, criminals will find a way to overcome it, thus it is always in a state of flux.

Therefore Avant-Garde Security Services remains up-to-date with the latest international security developments and the global political, economic and crime scenarios because it affects the country and our business.

We have proved ourselves, and our traits of integrity, cooperation, respect for customers, caring nature, and PR have become the talk of the town. I don't say we are the best or the number one security firm in the country, but others say so. I don't believe in competition because I don't have the time to focus on those petty aspects.

I As the head of such a successful security firm, what is your assessment of the level of crime in Sri Lanka?

The national level of crime is extremely high with serious incidents taking place on a daily basis. It is beyond the control of the Police who are often hindered because of political or other interference. The Police are unable to single-handedly provide all the security services the private companies offer. In fact, we are assisting the police to curb and prevent crime in this country but we are not recognized for our brave efforts.

I What is your vision for your company? Do you have any plans for diversification?

My mission is to have the entire control of Colombo's security services in my hand by the year 2006. Then I will begin earning profits since at the moment we are just making our margins.

Our priorities are to do a good job with the customers' satisfaction as well as to build a name for ourselves in the country. Unlike an insurance company that covers a client after an unfortunate incident, a security firm needs to prevent such an incident from taking place. Thus you have to be proactive in order to have the upper hand.

Many people have inquired about why I don't diversify into other sectors. My simple reply is that this is my bread and butter, the only job I know, and I have mastered it. My formal education is only up to the Ordinary Level but in security, I have my PhD, although it may not be a paper qualification. I learn about global security activities. I would like to do what I know rather than what I don't know. If I start something else, I should learn thoroughly about that subject as well, which I don't have the time for.

As Sri Lanka develops, the security business will grow. Conversely, if the country is down, desperate people start bullying, looting and kidnapping so again security is a requirement. For instance, even if a company closes its offices, a security guard has to remain to man the gate. It is only when other businesses completely fail that we fail. Therefore security provision is a service that will always be in demand.

I With so much on your shoulders, do you truly enjoy your job?

My job is extremely complicated and demanding. We face life-threatening situations and deal with different

institutions and malicious people on a daily basis. I have to protect some of the most valuable people in the country whose lives are under threat. Thus all their problems come to me. Though it involves immense pressure and major responsibilities, I can honestly say that I like it, because I love the challenge.

I have been working for almost 18 hours a day, everyday for the last eight years. I take a maximum of three to four days' leave for the whole year, no Poya day or weekend holidays. My job and my company are the chief priority in my life, everything else including my family, comes second.

I was not alone in my journey towards success; my wife Shanika sacrificed a lucrative job and joined me to shoulder the responsibility of developing my business. She is by my side to share with me in the joy of success and the agony of setbacks. My attitude of placing my family second to my business was taken in the right spirit by her. She has been an inspiration and encouragement to me, and I owe a great deal to her.



Readers' Comments:

Shiyan Doole

2013-09-19 10:20:58

Chairman what can i say about him, he is the most sincere and inspiring and humble person, and heart melted person i ever see,and he was a great chairman to me,I'm very proud to be in the team of Avant Garde Maritime Services and i'm happy to work under him, i wish you a ever success and for your family and your company to become a best company of the world.

sivakumar thangavel

2013-02-14 13:24:39

The greatest person i have ever worked,he gave the experience to face challenges,my first with u was amazing,i have great honor to u sir,if i am in this position ur one of the inspiration,thanks and gbu.....

Theja Basnayaka

2013-02-10 15:53:11

Sir, you are the GREATEST person I ever respect most. Ur remarkable with good commandings and many ways. I have no words to discribe abt ur kind heart sir.May Tripple Gem bless you and your family!

Lal Jayawardene

2013-02-10 14:39:53

A man of success with determination. 1996 with Rs.12.00 in pocket reached his goal in just 3 or 4 years and now a business tycoon. Keep going Nissanka, good luck for Avant Group.....

Nishantha Dias

2013-02-09 18:27:35

I had wonderful opportunity to work under him. I have been learn lot under his leadership.....He is a wonderful, great leader ever i saw in my life time.....Sir, i Respect you all times in my life.....You always inspiring me to learn

A.K.Sulaiman

2013-02-09 16:59:42

My chairman nissanka senadhipathi is one of the greatest person i met in life the reason for me to say this is i was no where in my life.i could play a little basketball and have basic knowladge of accounts. he is the person who gave me a job first and thats the place where started life,i had to leave him due to reasons,that has led me today i am working abroad in a international company as accounts assitant. i never want anything bad happening to him i am always willing to work with him as he is a great person to me. may allah shower his blessings on him and his family,

Mariia

2013-02-07 15:22:01

Only by surviving on the conditions that this person has endured can give the incredible inner power that Major Nissanka Senadhipathi has. He's the person of century for his nation! Proud of being in his team.

arjuna

2012-12-20 23:46:59

He is really roll model to anybody want to susses.many more things to learn from him..

A Vigneswaran (CHAIRMAN VMS TRAVELS

2012-11-05 11:27:03

All though I did not have the opportunity to meet you personally yetit was very inspiring for me to learn is that nothing is impossible fom your experience to achieve if one has the will.....More importantly I was touched by your kind deeds to relief the under privilaged.....This is only possible by people those who FOLLOW LORD BUDDHAS TEACHINGS AND GUIDANCE.....May tripple gem bless you

narjes dhokar

2012-09-17 10:20:01

Chairman Nissanka Senadhipathi is the most inspiring and humble person i ever met in my hole life. I'm very proud to be in the team of Avant Garde Maritime Services.He inspire us everyday.Thank you again,Narjes

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