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# From Pokhara to Kandahar: The Two Hundred Year Journey of the Force That Made Nepal Famous

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*From Pokhara to Kandahar: The Two Hundred Year Journey of  
the Force That Made Nepal Famous*



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## *Abstract*

*The Gurkhas are renowned throughout the world for their fighting skills, their bravery, and their loyalty to the British Crown. Much has been written on their distinguished history, but traditional literature on the Gurkhas leaves several questions unanswered. How did the Gurkhas come to be as a fighting force for the British Empire when the British never occupied Nepal? How have they survived the independence of India and the subsequent dismantling of the British Empire? And what will the future of the Gurkhas be? Will they continue their two centuries of service to the British Crown? Or will they become another footnote to the history of the British Empire? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions, and follows the history of the Gurkhas from their inception in 1815 to their current service in Afghanistan and the ongoing struggle by veteran Gurkhas for equal rights. Much of the research for this project consisted of interviews with people throughout Nepal affected in some way by the Gurkhas. This included veterans – both former Gurkhas and the British officers who served with them – the head of a training academy that caters to young Nepalese who want to join the Gurkhas, and several of the young hopefuls themselves. This paper also draws heavily on academic texts for a background and history of the Gurkhas. The Future of the Brigade of Gurkhas is uncertain, but their two hundred year past is undoubtedly one of the more fascinating and inspiring stories in contemporary military history.*

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

Why have I written a piece on the Gurkhas? It's a valid question, considering the number of accounts that have already been published on the Gurkhas history and exploits over their two-century lifespan. Noted academics, ex-Gurkhas, and those closely associated with them have all produced histories and memoirs on the Gurkhas that are far more detailed than I can match. Nor have I attempted to do so here. For those looking for an in depth history on the Gurkhas or a collection of personal recollections I have included a section at the end that details some of the best that I have discovered. I strongly encourage all those interested in the Gurkhas to peruse them.

This work is not an attempt to detail the full history of the British Gurkhas, though a much-abbreviated history of The Brigade of Gurkhas (as they are now known) is included to provide context.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it a collection of memories from serving or veteran Gurkhas, though I have included several such where appropriate.

Instead I intend this work to be a study of what the future of the Gurkhas might be. The British Army is downsizing, and the Brigade of Gurkhas has already been affected by this move. Despite this, the modern military environment calls for a unit like the Gurkhas as much as it did at their inception almost 200 years ago. Modern interest in military service throughout Europe is at an all time low, something that has already proved a problem for the British. The need for soldiers trained in asymmetric warfare has never been higher, and this is a role the Gurkhas have long been involved in. And as the British public grows less and less tolerant of military casualties of any number, the draw of recruiting non-British citizens to fight Britain's wars has become greatly appealing, if morally questionable. I therefore believe that far from disappearing, the Gurkhas are poised to become an even more essential component of the British national security complex than they ever have been before.

This work would not have been possible without the in depth assistance of many individuals and organizations. First and foremost, I owe the entire staff of my SIT program a debt of thanks. Without their patience, support, and contacts I would never have been able to even begin this. A big thank you as well to my academic advisor, both at home and abroad, Professor Andrew Latham, who originally suggested I study the Gurkhas, and thus opened the door to all of this.

I'd like to offer a special thanks to all those who were willing to meet with me and answer my endless questions in interviews. A full list would take far too long, but in particular I'd like to thank Major Krishna Gurung (retired), senior welfare officer at the GWS Pokhara welfare center, who opened his center to me and put me in contact with some of its residents, Colonel John Cross (retired), the remarkable ex British officer who, after serving his country for several decades, has made Nepal his home for the last 37 years, Lieutenant Colonel Elton Davis, Chief of Staff of British Gurkha Nepal, who took the time to meet with me and give me a background

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<sup>1</sup> Though I have tried to avoid military jargon wherever possible, some references to Brigades, Battalions, and the like are unavoidable. I have, therefore, included a glossary at the end of this paper with all relevant martial terms, and I strongly encourage anyone unfamiliar with military vocabulary to consult it prior to reading the body of this paper.



to all things related to the British Gurkhas, Mr. Rahul Pandey, head and founder of Salute Gorkha Training Academy, and Mr. Bibek Bhandari, the journalist who put me in contact with practically everyone else.

Finally, and most importantly, are the Gurkhas themselves. Since their inception in 1815 they have fought through the Indian mutiny, four Afghan Wars, two World Wars, the Malayan Emergency, the Brunei uprising, two wars in Iraq, the Falklands, and security operations in Sierra Leon, Bosnia, East Timor, and Kosovo. Never has a military force had such a unique identity or place in history. My thanks pale in comparison to Sir Ralph Turner's, who served with the Gurkhas in The First World War and wrote what is justifiably the most famous tribute to them in his 1931 *Dictionary of the Nepali Language*.

As I write these words my thoughts return to those who were my comrades, the stubborn and indomitable peasants of Nepal. Once more I hear the laughter with which you greeted every hardship. Once more I see you in your bivouacs or about your fires, on forced march or in the trenches, now shivering with wet and cold, now scorched by a pitiless and burning sun. Uncomplaining you endure hunger and thirst, and wounds; and at the last your wavering lines disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Turner: 1931, ix.

### *Overview: The Importance of a Name*

[The Gurkhas] neither march nor carry their arms in a style anything superior to that of the rabble ordinarily identified with the title of sepoy in the service of the Hindustan powers nor would their discipline appear to be much stricter... [however] with all their defects I am disposed to think that they are on the whole no bad soldiers. They are brave, sufficiently tractable, and capable of sustaining great hardship.<sup>3</sup>

Captain William Kirkpatrick, first British visitor to Kathmandu, 1793



Figure 1

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<sup>3</sup> Kirkpatrick, William: 1793, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 29.

## Introduction

On March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Rifleman Tuljung Gurung was on guard outside his company's camp of Helmand outside the town of Nahr-e Seraj, Afghanistan. Around four in the morning he spotted two Taliban insurgents running towards his watchtower. When challenged the insurgents opened fire, hitting Tuljung Gurung in his helmet, knocking him down. As he got to his feet Tuljung Gurung was hit again, this time with a grenade. Acting quickly Tuljung threw back the grenade just before it exploded. He escaped the shrapnel but was once again knocked to the ground by the grenade's concussion. As Tuljung climbed to his feet he was confronted by one of the Taliban fighters, who had climbed into the guard tower. To close to use his rifle, Tuljung drew his Khukuri and engaged the Taliban fighter in hand-to-hand combat.<sup>4</sup> The two fell out of the watchtower to the ground three meters (ten feet) below. Continuing to fight, Tuljung,

“just hit him in the hand, body, I just started to hit him... I just thought I don't want to die. If I am alive I can save my colleagues... I thought, before he does something I have to do something. I was like a madman.”<sup>5</sup>

Tuljung eventually drove the insurgents off, and for his bravery was recently awarded The Military Cross, Great Britain's third highest award for valor.<sup>6</sup>

Accounts of Tuljung's heroism in the British press are full of praise for his selfless bravery and toughness. They stress that Tuljung fought with a Khukuri, the traditional knife of the Gurkha soldiers and their forbears, the “martial” tribes of Nepal. And they make much of his stated concern for his British comrades.<sup>7</sup>

All appropriate and honorary descriptions to be sure, but Tuljung Gurung's very presence in Afghanistan raises questions not addressed in the reports on his actions. Nepal is not, and never has been, a colony of Great Britain, nor is it currently at war with Afghanistan. What, therefore, is a young Nepali man doing fighting a war in Afghanistan wearing a British uniform? What drives thousands of Nepalese boys like him to compete every year for a mere 130 positions in the Brigade he's serving in? Why does almost all news regarding the Gurkhas focus exclusively on their bravery, loyalty, and ferocity as the reports on Tuljung Gurung do? And if the lure and fame of the Gurkhas is so great, why has a Gurkha veteran just concluded a hunger strike in Britain that would have been to the death? Perhaps most importantly, what will the future of this fascinating and unique unit be?

This paper is an attempt to answer, or at least explore, some of these questions. In it, I examine how the Gurkhas came to be, how they have survived throughout almost 200 years of war, peace, and division after Indian independent, and what their mark on history has been thus far. Today the Brigade of Gurkhas, as they have come to be known, has been reduced to a mere 2,700 men.

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of the Khukuri and its importance to the Gurkhas see Appendix B.

<sup>5</sup> BBC News: October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The Daily Mail: October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

It will soon be further reduced to 2,500.<sup>8</sup> The British government has publically stated that it is committed to maintaining the unit for the next several decades, but the long-term future of the Brigade of Gurkhas is very much in doubt.

Despite this the visibility of the Gurkhas has never been higher. Their name and emblem of two crossed khukuris are on seemingly everything in their home nation of Nepal, from beer to guesthouses to restaurants. In India – where the majority of Gurkhas remained after the 1947 partition of the Gurkha regiments between India and Britain – the Gurkhas (or Gorkhas, as they are known there), have thrived, and now make up around 40,000 men in seven Regiments.<sup>9</sup> More serve in the Singapore police, where they act as the equivalent of United States SWAT teams, specializing in counter-terrorism, hostage crises, and riot control.<sup>10</sup>

This disparity between the Gurkhas' perception and service internationally and their actual size and relative importance within Great Britain's armed forces is a result of the Gurkhas' almost two hundred year history with the British Crown, and the unique position they occupy as the only foreign citizens currently serving in the British Army in any organized capacity. Two hundred years ago the Gurkhas were hardly unique, just one small component of the far-flung British Empire. In order to maintain and protect this empire, Britain employed units drawn from all of its colonies. These forces ranged from the Indian Army, comprised of thousands of native Indians serving in properly trained and equipped regiments led by British officers, to irregular forces, poorly (if at all) paid and equipped, under mostly local direction. The Gurkhas began as the latter, and their subsequent transformation to a regular military unit in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and all they have accomplished since is one of the more fascinating stories in military history.

More importantly, this evolutionary story is essential to understanding the two key aspects of the Gurkhas that make them unique among contemporary military forces. This first is that, unlike all other forces the British have employed throughout their history, the Gurkhas' homeland of Nepal was never a colony of the British (or any other) Empire. The second is the Gurkhas continual (albeit much reduced) existence within the British Armed Forces, long after the independence of Britain's former colonies and the subsequent nationalization or disbandment of those forces formerly under British control.

This continued existence is, in part because of its uniqueness, under grave threat from some within the British and Nepalese governments. As demands for equal pay and pensions for the Gurkhas reduce one of their key attractions to the British government – their relative cheapness – demand for their services has been greatly reduced. Furthermore, some politicians in Nepal have called for an end to British recruitment of Nepalese youth, labeling it immoral, exploitive, and a holdover from colonial times.<sup>11</sup> Either of these groups could put an end to the Gurkhas at any time, though it does not seem that this will take place for several decades at least. Whether or

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<sup>8</sup> From an interview held with Lieutenant Colonel Elton Davis, Chief of Staff of British Gurkha Nepal, the headquarters for Gurkha recruitment and pension distribution, on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>9</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Parker: 1999, 380.

<sup>11</sup> Lamsal: 2009.

not the Gurkhas will be a long-term component of the British Armed Forces, however, is uncertain.

This paper is in part an attempt to answer this long-term question. I have structured it into three components to best explore the history, modern structure, and future, of the British Gurkhas. The first is a section on the history of the Gurkhas, from their formation in the midst of the brief but bloody Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-1815 to their subsequent incorporation into the Indian Army and subsequent service in Afghanistan, the Mutiny, and the World Wars, to their partition after Indian independence in 1947 and all they have accomplished since. The second section is an exploration of the British Brigade of Gurkhas as they exist today, from the current structure of the Brigade itself to the evolving fight of Gurkha veterans for equal rights. In this segment I also look into the modern recruitment policies of the British army, and how they have evolved over the years. In the final section I explore what the Brigade of Gurkhas might look like in the future. Throughout this paper I have focused on the British Gurkhas, and mostly ignored the Gurkhas serving in the Indian army and Singapore police. These two organizations are beyond the scope of this paper, and deserve their own histories. Also, neither is in danger of disappearing anytime soon. The same cannot be said of their brothers serving with the British army. The fate of the British Gurkhas is ultimately subject to the whims of British and Nepalese politicians, and neither of these groups is known to be particularly predictable. Despite this, I believe that the Brigade of Gurkhas will survive well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Due to their popularity with the British public, their distinguished military record, and the poor Nepalese economy, I believe that the Brigade of Gurkhas will continue to be a unique and highly visible component of the modern British Armed Forces.

## The Origin of the Gurkha

Before delving into the history of the Gurkhas, it is necessary to define what, exactly, a Gurkha is. The word itself is derived from Gorkha, which is the short form of the Sanskrit word *Gorakhanath*, the war deity worshiped by many of the hill tribes in what is now western Nepal.<sup>12</sup> *Gorakhnath* in turn is derived from Sikh *goraksakah*, protector of cattle (*goraksa* means cattle in Nepalese).<sup>13</sup> The main temple of *Gorakhanath* is in (and gives name to) the small town of Gorkha, in the hills about 80 kilometers (50 miles) west of Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> king of Gorkha, Sri Panch Maharaj Dhiraj Prithvi Narayan Shah (better known as Prithvi Narayan Shah), who conquered the Kathmandu valley in 1768 and united Nepal for the first time. When his descendants came into conflict with the British in 1815, the Nepalese army was a mix of soldiers drawn from all over Nepal. The British labeled those from the hills of western and eastern Nepal as Gurkhas, and began recruiting them almost immediately.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cross: 2000, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Originally the British referred to the Gurkha as “Goorkha”, which more accurately represents the true pronunciation of the name. In 1891, however, the British standardized the spelling to “Gurkha”, and it has remained that way ever since, though in the army of independent India, it was changed back to “Gorkha” for the seven regiments who remained in that country. For simplicity’s sake I always use “Gurkha” when referring to the soldiers employed by Great Britain and Singapore, and “Gorkha” when referring to either those employed by independent India or as a catchall term for the various hill tribes who came to be recruited as Gurkhas.

There is no such thing as a “Gorkha” ethnic group in Nepal though there are certainly some ethnic groups that permeate Gurkha history, and others that are conspicuously absent.<sup>15</sup> When the British originally recruited Gurkhas they limited this recruitment to the so-called martial tribes of Nepal: the Gurungs, Magars, Limbus, Rais, Tamangs, Sunwars, Thakurs, and Chhetris. The Gurungs, Magars, and Sunwars are from western Nepal, the Limbus and Rais from the east, the Tamangs from the north, the Chhetris from the south, and the Thakurs are spread all over the country.<sup>16</sup>

The Gurungs and Magars are both originally of Mongolian heritage, and they intermixed with North Indian nobility who fled to Nepal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to escape the Mughal Empire’s expansion (the nobility were all Hindus afraid of being persecuted by the Mughals, who were Muslims).<sup>17</sup> The British already regarded both the Mongols and the Northern Indians as potent soldiers, so considered this mix to make particularly effective fighters. These two groups primarily made up the first Gurkhas recruited by the British.

The Sunwar are religiously very similar to the Magars and intermarried with them for centuries, but retained their own identity. The British did not recruit them until 1909 because they came from a very geographically small area in western Nepal.

The Limbus and Rais are both also thought to be from Mongolian background, and speak a dialect that is closer to the Tibetan-Burmese language group than it is to modern Nepalese. They did not intermix as much with the Northern Indian refugees, so are for the most part less orthodox Hindus than the Gurungs or Magars. The British began recruitment of the Limbus and Rais around 1887.<sup>18</sup>

The Tamangs are of Tibetan origin, and are more likely to be Buddhist than Hindu. They border the Gurungs to the north, and Gurkhas from other castes were originally against their recruitment because of their willingness to eat beef and their low status within the traditional Nepalese caste system.<sup>19</sup>

The Thakur and Chhetris are the highest castes traditionally recruited as Gurkhas, and the kings of Nepal have all been Thakurs ever since Shah unified Nepal in 1768. The Chhetris are the direct offspring of the Indian immigrants to Nepal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Both of these groups belong to the *Kshatriya* caste, the traditional warrior class of India that is second only to Brahmans in prestige.

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<sup>15</sup> Note that when referring to the various groups that make up Nepal I have elected to use the label “ethnic groups”, not castes. These groups are hieratically separated, but most are on approximately the same level, and to go into Nepal’s complex caste system is far beyond the scope of this paper. Many of these groups do have very distinct cultural and religious practices, however, so I refer to them as separate ethnic groups, not castes.

<sup>16</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 17.

These eight ethnic groups were chosen above all others in Nepal because of the British martial race theory. This theory held that some races and castes made intrinsically better soldiers than others. This was expressed by then Major-General George MacMunn in 1911:

It is one of the essential differences between the East and West, that in the East, with certain exceptions, only certain clans and classes can bear arms; others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior. In Europe as we know, every able bodied man, given food and arms, is a fighting man of sort... In the East, or certainly in India, this is not so... Nor are appearances of any use as a criteria. Some of the most manly looking people in India are in this respect the most despicable.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the policy driving British recruitment of Gurkhas well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century revolved around the theory that some groups were inherently better suited to combat than others. Another factor that drove early recruitment of these ethnic groups was that with the exception of the Chhetris and Thakurs the recruited races were of relatively low caste and social standing. They also tended to be less devout (or at least less orthodox) Hindus than the typical Indian soldiers. This made them a very pragmatic choice for the British Army because they lacked many of the dietary and other restrictions that plagued most Indian regiments.

Today British recruitment is “free, fair, and transparent” and the British recruiters are devoted to accepting potential recruits from all geographic and ethnic spectrums across Nepal. Despite this policy, the aforementioned ethnic groups made up 87.73% of total applicants for the Brigade of Gurkhas in 2009 and 92.62% of those eventually accepted. Revealingly, the Brahmans made up only 1.63% of those who applied for the Gurkhas and none of them made it to the final round of selection.<sup>21</sup> This data shows that whatever British intensions, for the most part the Gurkhas remain composed of men from the same groups they were in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed the majority of Gurkhas today are from families that have had a long history of service with the Gurkhas.<sup>22</sup>

Thus while the Gurkhas have never been comprised of a single caste or ethnic group they have historically been drawn from only select groups within Nepal considered to be “martial”. Even today, when any Nepali can in theory join the Gurkhas, these groups make up over 90% of all accepted recruits. Historically these groups were recruited because they were relatively low caste and a loose adherence to orthodox Hinduism (at least compared to most Indian Sepoys). When they first came into conflict with the British in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century they impressed the British with their prowess in battle, ability to suffer great hardship, and their courage in the face of overwhelming odds.

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<sup>20</sup> George MacMunn, from his 1911 *The Armies of India* (London, Charles Black), cited in Bellamy’s 2011 *The Gurkhas: Special Force*.

<sup>21</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 19. These numbers are from a table Bellamy put together using data from the Pokhara and Dharan regional recruitment centers in western and eastern Nepal respectively, which he visited in 2010. For a full copy of this table see Appendix C.

<sup>22</sup> Major Krishna Gurung (retired) told me this in an interview on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Pokhara. Major Krishna himself is a good example; he is an ex-Gurkha, as are his father and grandfather.

## *The History of the Gurkhas*

He [Rifleman Kulbir Thapa] found a badly wounded soldier of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Leicestershire Regiment behind the first line German trench, and, though urged by the British soldier to save himself, he remained with him all day and night. In the early morning of 26<sup>th</sup> September, in misty weather, he brought him out through the German wire, and, leaving him in a place of comparative safety, returned and brought in two wounded Gurkhas one after the other. He then went back in broad daylight for the British soldier and brought him in also, carrying him most of the way and being at most points under [the] enemy's fire.<sup>23</sup>

From a *London Gazette* article on Kulbir Thapa, first Gurkha to win the Victorian Cross at Loos, Western Front, 1915



Figure 2

<sup>23</sup> From November 18<sup>th</sup> 1915 article in *The London Gazette*, cited in Bellamy: 2011, 167.



## **Inception: The Anglo-Nepalese War**

The two hundred year history of the British Gurkhas officially began in 1815 with the Anglo-Nepalese War, but two earlier occurrences are essential to the Gurkhas' story. The first was the conquest of Gorkha by Drabva Shah, the King of Lamjung (a region to the northwest of Gorkha) in 1559. This conquest occurred around the time that over a thousand northern Indian nobles fled to Nepal to escape the Muslim Mughal Empire. These nobles intermarried with the local population, creating the mix of Mongolian and Northern Indian blood that the British would find so potent almost 300 years later. For nine generations the Shahs were content to rule Gorkha, but this ended in 1723 with the birth of Prithvi Narayan Shah. In 1742 Prithvi Narayan came to power, and he immediately began expanding into the Kathmandu valley and the surrounding hill kingdoms. At the time the Kathmandu Valley was comprised of three competing kingdoms, centered in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Patan. Prithvi Narayan realized he didn't have the strength to invade the valley directly, so he occupied the surrounding heights and blocked all trade with the valley. Then he used several thousand Brahmins (for the most part the only literate group at the time) to serve as public relations officers. This convinced several Kirtipur nobles to hand over the lower part of the city of Kirtipur to him. When much of the rest of the city refused to surrender and retreated to a fortified part of the city Prithvi Narayan offered them amnesty, then cut off the lips and noses of everyone who had defied him. When he next marched on Kathmandu and Patan the cities quickly surrendered rather than suffer the same fate. By 1768 Prithvi Narayan was in control of the Kathmandu Valley, and a year later he controlled most of Nepal.<sup>24</sup> It was the first time Nepal had ever been united.

The second event leading to the eventual birth of the Gurkhas was the origin of The Honorable East India Company on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1600, when it was granted a charter from Queen Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>. Though in theory a joint stock company, the East India Company soon grew far more powerful than any other private enterprise in history. In 1611 the East India Company established its first trading post in India, and in 1657 Lord Cromwell gave it sole rights to trade in the subcontinent. It began recruiting a private army almost immediately to protect its investments, and in 1757 Company officer Robert Clive organized these scattered forces into regiments commanded by British officers and equipped with British weapons. Clive used these regiments to defeat the French forces in India in several key battles in the 1750s and conquer many of the divided Indian kingdoms, paving the way for the British domination of India. In 1757 the East India Company officially took over administration of British India.<sup>25</sup> The Company used its private army and, with the full support of the British Crown, expanded its holdings in India until it controlled almost all of modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It continued to govern this territory until the Indian Mutiny of 1858.

The Anglo-Nepalese war had its genesis in these two events, but the direct cause for the conflict was the aggressive territorial expansions of the new Kingdom of Nepal to the south and west and the expansion of the East India Company to the north. In 1778 Rana Bahadur Shah, grandson of Prithwi Narayan, came to power, but as he was only a boy his uncle acted as regent. The uncle attempted to continue Prithwi Narayan's expansions, so invaded Sikkim to the east and Tibet to the north. The Tibetan invasion ended in disaster after the Chinese intervened and invaded

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<sup>24</sup> Parker: 1999, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 40.

Nepal, forcing the Nepalese to pay tribute to the Chinese empire before withdrawing. With the north closed to possible expansion the Nepalese moved west, now under the control of Rana Bahadur Shah himself after he executed his powerful uncle. The Nepalese conquered Kumaon, Sirmoor, Gahrwal, and Simal, all of which were nominally under the protection of the East India Company. By 1794 the Kingdom of Nepal extended from Sikkim to the east to the border of Kashmir to the west.<sup>26</sup>

At first the East India Company tolerated Nepalese incursions into Northern India; they had troubles enough consolidating their hold of the rest of the country, and had no desire to confront the 15,000 man Nepalese Army. Whatever the Company's intentions, events within Nepal soon made this confrontation inevitable. Rana Bahadur Shah was assassinated in 1807 and his prime minister, Bhim Sen Thapa came to power.<sup>27</sup> In order to prevent resistance to his assumption of power that had traditionally been held by the Shahs, Bhim Sen embarked on further conquest. With the Chinese to the north and the powerful Sikhs to the west he moved south, towards the rich plains of India. The East India Company was forced into action, and officially declared war with Nepal on the November 1<sup>st</sup> 1814.<sup>28</sup>

The Anglo-Nepalese war was a three-year affair, characterized by intense fighting between the larger, better trained, and better-equipped British forces and their Nepalese opponents, who were more experienced in mountain warfare and had the advantage of fighting defensively. The hill tribes that would eventually be recruited as Gurkhas made up a numerical minority of the total Nepalese force, but they were the "core" of the army, and were at the forefront of almost every battle. The British force numbered approximately 42,000 men, composed of East India Company Sepoy regiments, regular army regiments (i.e. regiments comprised purely of British soldiers, often viewed as superior to Sepoy regiments), and Indian irregulars (mostly cavalry and light infantry forces, commanded by Indian, not British officers). The British also had a significant number of artillery pieces, which the Nepalese did not possess.<sup>29</sup>

The British forces were divided into four divisions, each of which attacked along a separate axis to divide the Nepalese forces. Two of these attacks were into Nepal proper, the other two were to the west, towards the areas occupied by Nepal in the previous decades. It is a testament to the ability of the Nepalese Army and the difficulty of the terrain that despite possessing superior numbers and weaponry both attacks into Nepal failed. In the west the British initially more successful, until they reached Nalapani ko Ladain, a small hill fort outside of the town of Dehra Doon garrisoned by 650 Gorkhas under the command of Balbahadur Singh Thapa. The British force was around 2,700 strong and under the command of Major General Rollo Gillespie. The British encircled the fort and after the Gorkhas refused to surrender, they attacked. After several attempts to take the fort were beaten back with heavy casualties to both sides General Gillespie personally led an attack. He made to within thirty meters of the fort but was shot and died in the arms of Lieutenant Frederick Young, his aide-de-camp. Young was to have a tremendous impact on the formation of the Gurkhas in later years. The fighting went on for another month before,

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<sup>26</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 30. For a map of India around this time see Appendix A.

<sup>27</sup> Thapa is the surname used by Chhetris and Magars.

<sup>28</sup> Bellmay: 2011, 33.

<sup>29</sup> For a detailed description of the weaponry involved in this and all other Gurkha related conflicts see Appendix B.

out of ammunition, food, and water; the Gorkhas were forced to retreat. Balbanhadur Sing Thapa escaped with 85 able-bodied men, leaving his wounded to be treated by the British. The battle cost the British almost 800 men and delayed their advance for over a month, the Gorkhas lost 520.<sup>30</sup>

The battle was the most famous example of courage exhibited by Gorkhas in the war, but it was not by any means the only one. In mid April 1815, the British under the command of Colonel Ochterlony, commander of the second western division, occupied the heights around the town of Malaun. This cut off a large Nepalese force under the command of Bakhti Thapa, who was forced to attempt to retake the high ground. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April Bakhti Thapa attempted to do just that, and in the words of Lieutenant Ross, a British officer present at the battle:

Bhugtee Thappa [sic] made a grand attack on B [the main British position] which lasted nearly two Hours, and during which they sustained the hardest fire of grape [see glossary] and musquetry I ever heard. They returned there several times to the charge with most unparalleled intrepidity and endeavored sword in hand to cut in upon our guns, during which as fast as one set of men were knocked down others springing up from behind rocks rushed forward to supply their places. They were finally driven back from all quarters with a loss which though not ascertained must have been very great.<sup>31</sup>

Altogether the Nepalese lost a quarter of their force, including Bakhti Thapa himself. Unable to capture the high ground, the Nepalese were soon forced to surrender, but the British allowed them to return to Nepal and retain their weaponry and colors, at the time the supreme gesture of respect a victor could show to a defeated foe.<sup>32</sup> The Nepalese had lost all the territories to the east and west they had formerly occupied, and were seemingly beaten. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1815 the treaty of Segauli was signed by the two nations.<sup>33</sup>

Prime Minister Bhim Sen, however, was not willing to accept defeat. He refused to ratify the treaty, so in January of 1816 Colonel Ochterlony was given command of a division of 19,400 men and ordered to capture Kathmandu itself. Ochterlony was initially confronted by Nepalese soldiers occupying the passes into Nepal, but through forced marches and careful reconnaissance he managed to flank the Nepalese and force them to retreat. The Nepalese fought gallantly, but by early March of 1816 Ochterlony's forces were within 30 kilometers (15 miles) of Kathmandu. On March 4<sup>th</sup> Bhim Sen surrendered, and finally ratified the treaty of Segauli. The war was over, the British-Nepalese border was solidified, and the distinguished 200 years of Gurkha service to the British Crown could begin.

The first Nepalese recruited by the British were, ironically enough, not Gorkhas at all. At the time the British considered Gorkhas too untrustworthy to arm, so they turned instead to other Nepalese who were disgruntled with Bhim Sen's government. These men were formed into an irregular corps around 3,300 strong under the command of Lieutenant Young, who had

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<sup>30</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Lieutenant Ross: April 20<sup>th</sup> 1815, from a letter from Ross to Captain Birch, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Parker: 1999, 45.

witnessed the bravery of the Gorkhas first hand at the battle of Nalapani ko Ladain. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1815 they made their combat debut, and it was an unmitigated disaster. The corps was tasked with capturing a supply column guarded by just 800 Gorkhas. Despite outnumbering the Gorkhas by over four to one, the corps was repulsed with heavy casualties. When the Gorkhas counterattacked they routed Young's forces, many of whom subsequently deserted.<sup>34</sup>

The debacle convinced the British that it was the Gorkhas they should attempt to recruit, not the groups they had conquered. Even before this skirmish occurred Ochterlony had begun forming captured Gorkhas into an engineering battalion. He titled this battalion "Nusseeree", which derived from the Hindustani word *nasir*, meaning protector or friend and in turn is from the Arabic word *nasr*, meaning help or victory. This battalion became the foundation for the 1<sup>st</sup> Nasiri battalion, one of the first of three official Gurkha battalions. The other two original Gurkha battalions were the Malaun Battalion and the Sirmoor Battalion under Lieutenant Young. These battalions were made official in the British East India Company Governor-General's order on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1815:

Major-General Ochterlony will be pleased to form the whole of the Goorkhas who came over during the late Campaign to the westwards, both Nusserees and those under Lieutenant F. Young into three battalions... the Nusseree and Sirmoor Battalions are to be armed with musquets... Each man to maintain and wear his kookrey [sic] in a leather waist belt.<sup>35</sup>

Soon after a fourth battalion was formed, the Kumaon Provincial Battalion. This brought the total number of Gurkhas up to around 5,000 men on paper. They would not have to wait long for suitable employment.<sup>36</sup>

### **Baptism By Fire: Afghanistan, The Mutiny, and the Great Game**

The Gurkhas initially played a very minor role in the East India Company's army, and it would take several decades for their full value to be widely appreciated. They started life as irregulars instead of the line regiments that made up the majority of the British army in India.<sup>37</sup> This meant that the Gurkhas were paid less than Sepoys serving in line regiments, and had worse equipment. It also meant that the Gurkhas initially had only three British officers to each 1,300 strong battalion, or around one officer for every 440 men. By comparison the India regiments of the line had one officer for every 90 men, and the British regiments had one officer for every 30 men.<sup>38</sup> Thus at the time, most day to day running of the Gurkha Battalions was handled by Gurkha officers, though they had no commission and thus no authority outside of the battalion they served in.

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<sup>34</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 47.

<sup>35</sup> British East India Company Governor-General's Order of July 27<sup>th</sup>, 1815, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 54.

<sup>37</sup> In short the distinction between line regiments (or more properly regiments of the line) and irregulars was that the line regiments had the training and equipment to fight 'in the line of battle' while irregulars were primarily only used for skirmishing and other support duties. For a more comprehensive definition of both terms see the glossary.

<sup>38</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 64.

The first occasion that would provide suitable employment for the Gurkhas came about as a result of the “great game” between Britain and Russia that stretched over much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This “game” was a struggle between the two empires for influence over large swathes of Central Asia. This confrontation was a result of the growth of Russian power after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and its subsequent expansion south. In 1828 the Russians defeated the Persians after a two-year war and occupied the Caucasus.<sup>39</sup> The British were worried the Russians would move through Afghanistan into India, and to preempt this they attempted to install a ruler in Afghanistan who would be sympathetic to British interests. They chose Shah Shuja Durrani, a former emir of Afghanistan who had been deposed in 1809. In order to restore him to power the British sent a 21,000 strong force to invade Afghanistan. It was to be the first of many times the Gurkhas were deployed to that country.

The Gurkhas were not a part of the British invasion force, which made remarkably good initial progress. On August 7<sup>th</sup> 1839 the British forces captured Kabul and restored Shuja Durrani to power. Keeping him in power, however, proved a much greater challenge. A newly raised battalion of Gurkhas was sent to Afghanistan in early 1840 to serve as bodyguards to the Shah and train his own security forces. Unfortunately for them, the majority of British troops were withdrawn around the same time. The Afghans rebelled and massacred most of the remaining British garrison, including the Gurkhas. They killed Shuja Durrani and placed the son of the man the British had deposed in power. For the British it was a humiliating and costly end to the first Anglo-Afghan War and it set the stage for a return to Afghanistan several decades later, in which the Gurkhas would play a much more prominent role.

The second situation that would cement the Gurkhas presence in the British Army was the Sikh War of 1845. The Sikhs were another so called “martial race” and had troubled the British incessantly with cross-border raids. In 1845 the situation came to a head and an East India Company force including the Nasiri and Sirmoor Gurkha Battalions was sent to subdue the Sikh kingdom. Both battalions took part in the battle of Aliwal on January 17<sup>th</sup> 1846, which quickly devolved into hand-to-hand combat between both sides. The British were victorious but both battalions suffered around ten percent casualties. Less than a month later the two battalions took part in a second major battle at Sobraon, and suffered even heavier casualties. Their commander-in-chief, Viscount Hardinge noted their bravery and spirit in a dispatch on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January:

I must...especially...notice the determined hardihood and bravery with which our two battalions of Goorkahs, the Sirmoor and Nusseree [sic], met the Sikhs whenever they were opposed to them. Soldiers of small stature but indomitable spirit, they vied in ardent charge with the Grenadiers of our own nation, and armed with the short weapon of their mountains were a terror to the Sikhs throughout the great combat.<sup>40</sup>

To be compared to British Soldiers, and British Grenadiers at that (the Grenadiers were widely considered an elite of the British army at the time) was a tremendous honor, and demonstrated the high regard the Gurkhas were already held in among many British officers. On March of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>40</sup> Viscount Harding in a dispatch on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 1846, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 77.

1846 the Sikh war ended in a British victory, and they subsequently took over administration of the Sikh state of Punjab. Part of the aftermath of this conflict was the transformation of the Gurkhas from irregulars to regiments of the line. Sir Charles Napier – then commander-in-chief of British forces in India and a longtime proponent of the Gurkhas – made this official on the 22 of March 1850 in his General Order no. 173. This order converted the Gurkha battalions into Regiments of the line and gave them equal pay and status to Indian Regiments of the line.<sup>41</sup> At the same time a second Nasiri Battalion was created, raising the total Gurkha strength to five battalions.

By the mid 1850s the Gurkhas were an established component of the East India Company's army. The real test of loyalty for the Gurkhas, however, was the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The Mutiny was a culmination of many complex grievances commonly held by the Indian Sepoys, but its flashpoint was the issuing of new Enfield rifles to the Indian troops. These rifles required greased cartridges that had to be bit open prior to being used. A rumor soon circulated that the grease in question was either cow or pig, infuriating the Hindus and the Muslims respectively. The Sepoys refused to use the new rifles, and within days the Mutiny had gone from disobedience to a full revolt against British rule. Practically every Indian regiment was affected, and in many the British officers and their families were murdered by their own men. The Mutineers occupied Delhi on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1857, and soon controlled almost the entire north of India.<sup>42</sup>

Not a single Gurkha regiment went over to the mutineers, but many British officers questioned their loyalty. Nevertheless the British were suddenly faced with a critical shortage of reliable troops, so were forced to use the Gurkhas to attempt to put down the rebellion. On May 14<sup>th</sup> 1847 the Sirmoor Battalion – at the time only 490 strong – was sent to Meerut, the site of the initial mutiny. After word reached them that the Mutineers had captured Delhi they were diverted there, and joined forces with two British and several native Regiments. The force was supposed to recapture Delhi, but after discovering that there were over 30,000 mutineers in the city that proved impractical. The situation was further worsened after one of the native regiments switched sides, leaving just 4,000 men under British control to confront the Mutineers. The British force occupied some nearby heights and settled down for what was to be a more than three-month siege (though the British never had the strength to actually encircle and cut off the city).

During this period the small British force was under constant artillery fire, crippled by cholera, and subjected to twenty-six major attacks. The Mutineers consistently called for the Gurkhas to change sides, but they repeatedly refused, at one point pretending to accept only to open fire on the mutineers at close range, killing over thirty of them.<sup>43</sup> By mid July the Sirmoor Battalion had suffered almost fifty percent casualties, but they and the British Regiments held out until reinforced by 4,000 more British soldiers on August 9<sup>th</sup> 1857. The Kumaon Battalion was part of this force as well, and on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September the British and Gurkha Regiments attacked the

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<sup>41</sup> Sir Napier: March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1850, from his General Order no. 173, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 86.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 89.

city. They were successful, but at horrific cost. By the end of the fighting the Sirmoor Battalion had suffered 327 casualties out of its original strength of 490.<sup>44</sup>

The new Nasiri Battalion and the 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment (the renamed former Nasiri Battalion) had also taken part of sustained combat operations, and Lieutenant John Tytler of the 66<sup>th</sup> Regiment became the first Gurkha officer to win a Victorian Cross.<sup>45</sup> The mutiny was gradually subdued, though low-level insurgency continued for several decades. The Gurkhas had repeatedly proven their loyalty to the British, not only by refusing to join the mutineers, but also by fighting heroically against them at every opportunity. On November 1<sup>st</sup> 1858 the East India Company was abolished as a direct result of the mutiny, and the administration of India passed to the British Crown.<sup>46</sup> The Indian Army transferred to the Crown as well, the Gurkhas with it. No longer a small group of irregulars in a private army, the Gurkhas were now proven Regiments of the British Crown.

### **Expanding an Empire: Burma and a Return to Afghanistan**

In the aftermath of the Indian Mutiny, British fears of Russian influence into the Subcontinent reached a favor pitch. From 1853 to 1856 the two empires had clashed directly in the Crimean War, and despite the war ending in a British victory, fears over a Russian expansion into India remained. In 1863 the Afghan Government accepted a Russian ambassador but refused a British one. The old fears of a Russian invasion of India through Afghanistan resurfaced, and to preempt it the British launch a second invasion of Afghanistan in 1878. Some 40,000 British and Indian troops were involved in the invasion, and all five existing Gurkha regiments took part as well.<sup>47</sup> The British invaded Afghanistan from three directions, and each thrust contained at least one Gurkha Battalion. The central attack soon met heavy resistance, but after the 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Regiment and the 72<sup>nd</sup> Highlander Regiment flanked the Afghan positions and attacked from the rear the Afghans were forced to retreat. The Afghans sued for peace soon after, and on May 26<sup>th</sup> 1879 a peace treaty was signed and the Afghans agreed to accept a British ambassador.

The peace proved to be short lived, however, and on September 3<sup>rd</sup> the Afghans rose up and killed the ambassador and his entire bodyguard. Most of the British troops had already left, but a second invasion was soon launched. An 8,000 strong Afghan force with artillery confronted the invasion force and occupied a ridgeline outside Kabul. The same combination of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders and 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas drove the Afghans off the ridge in a frontal attack. Several days later the British recaptured Kabul and again installed their own Emir.<sup>48</sup> From that point on the British controlled the capital, but most of the countryside remained in rebellion to the British occupation.

The 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas were involved in a second major campaign in Afghanistan in July of 1880 after a mixed British and Indian Brigade was defeated in open battle by a much larger

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Prior to 1911 the Gurkhas themselves weren't eligible for a Victorian Cross, which remains the highest award for valor in the British army, equivalent to the American Medal of Honor.

<sup>46</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid,130.

Afghan force. The survivors retreated to a fort in Kandahar and were besieged by the Afghans. A relief force was quickly assembled and the Gurkhas were included. The force covered 480 kilometers (300 miles) in just three weeks, and after only a days rest they attacked the Afghan force. After several hours of hand-to-hand combat the British were victorious, and the last organized resistance to the British was crushed. In April of 1881 a second peace treaty was signed, and in addition to ending the conflict it gave the British control over a large swath of mountainous territory in what is now West Pakistan.

These territories have provided almost continuous employment for the Gurkhas ever since. The hill tribes that occupy these mountainous territories are much closer to those on the Afghan side of the border than they are to any people in India or modern Pakistan. They had traditionally held autonomy from the central rule of Kabul, and didn't take kindly to British attempts to govern them. The British were forced to create a significant frontier force including the 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Regiment to maintain security in the border region. There they were involved in constant low-level combat operations against the Afghan hill tribes. Their duties involved patrolling, conducting punitive raids, and counter-sniping; and are remarkably similar to what some Gurkhas are involved in over a century later in the same region. The 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha performed so heroically in this brutal environment that they became the most decorated of all the Gurkha Regiments, and are indeed one of the most decorated regiments in British history.<sup>49</sup>

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Gurkhas were also involved in heavy fighting in Burma, Malaysia, and Tibet, after the British launched an invasion in 1903. Small independent groups of Gurkhas were used by British intelligence officers to escort them on their reconnaissance missions throughout Central Asia as part of their "Great Game" attempting to thwart Russian influence in the area.<sup>50</sup> These activities continued until 1907, when Russia and Great Britain signed a defense treaty finally ending a century of competition between the two powers in Asia.

The Gurkhas services in the defense of the British Empire had not gone unnoticed. In 1884 the Indian High Command decided to double the size of the Gurkha forces by providing each of the five existing regiments with a second battalion.<sup>51</sup> This required a massive recruitment campaign that was initially unsuccessful. The Nepalese government had always been leery of allowing Britain to recruit its best soldiers and up to this point had never officially allowed it. In 1885, however, a Nepalese regime change led to greater acceptance of Gurkha recruitment. In 1888 Bir Shamsher, then Prime Minister of Nepal, officially sanctioned the British recruitment of Nepalese citizens for the first time in exchange for modern weapons.<sup>52</sup> The expansion of the existing Gurkha Regiments went ahead, and by the early 1900s the number of the regiments themselves had been doubled. Thus at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were approximately 20,000 Gurkhas serving in ten regiments. They composed a full eight percent of the entire

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<sup>49</sup> Parker: 1999, 77.

<sup>50</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 141.

<sup>51</sup> Parker: 1999, 78. For the distinction between a regiment and a battalion please see the glossary. In short a regiment could be composed of only a single battalion (as all Gurkha Regiments were up to this point), or as many as six or seven. When referring to a regiment that had multiple battalions I use the traditional style, which is to write the battalion number followed by the regiment's number and name. Thus the 1/3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Rifles refers to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Rifles Regiment.

<sup>52</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 136.



British Army in India.<sup>53</sup> Up to this point the Gurkhas had served in practically every military theater in the British eastern colonies. They had proved their loyalty and valor to the British High Command. Soon enough events in Europe would make the Gurkhas famous throughout the world, though at a horrific price.

### **Defending an Empire: The Great War and The Third Afghan War**

The full origins of the First World War are complex, still debated by historians, and completely beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say here that “The Great War” was a result of competing colonial and local interests between the great powers of Europe, which led to a system of mutual defense treaties that tied these nations together. The flashpoint for the conflict occurred on June 28<sup>th</sup> 1914, when a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In response Austria invaded Serbia, invoking the defense treaties that bound the major European powers together. The British joined the war on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August after Germany invaded Belgium. They fought alongside the Russians and French (and later the Italians, Japanese, and Americans) against the Austro-Hungarian, German, and later Ottoman Empires.

At the start of the conflict both sides were convinced that the war would be a brief affair, over by Christmas of 1914. The British assumed that they would do most of their fighting at sea, and initially deployed only six divisions to Europe to support the French Army. This proved to be completely insufficient, but the comparatively small British Army needed time to expand its numbers and train new recruits. In order to buy time for this force to reach the field, elements of the Indian Army were deployed to Europe. Six Gurkha battalions were part of this deployment (the 1/9<sup>th</sup>, 2/2<sup>nd</sup>, 2/3<sup>rd</sup>, 2/8<sup>th</sup>, 1/1<sup>st</sup>, and 1/4<sup>th</sup>) and they were completely unprepared for what war on the Western Front had become. The industrial revolution had transformed European warfare from a tactically and operationally intensive affair of maneuver where soldiers might march and countermarch for a month to fight a single battle, to a completely static bloodbath. New and improved technology such as machine guns, barbed wire, and much deadlier artillery forced troops to build deep trenches and turned any attack into a bloody mess. The Gurkha battalions had half the number of machine guns their British comrades did. The divisions they were a part of had less than half the number of artillery pieces, and the men had no grenades or trench mortars at all.<sup>54</sup>

The journey of the 2/8<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles is typical of Gurkha experiences on the western front. The battalion left for France via ship on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September and arrived on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October. On the 21<sup>st</sup> they arrived at Orléans, where they had only four days to unload their gear and recover from the journey before marching for the front. They occupied trenches near Festubert after midnight of the 30<sup>th</sup>, and were shelled and attacked soon after dawn. After only 24 hours at the front the battalion had suffered 220 casualties, over half of which were fatalities. These losses represented almost a quarter of the battalions total strength. After only a single days rest the battalion went into action again, and remained in continuous combat for 19 days, losing a quarter of their remaining men in the process. From then until the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1914, the battalion

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 162. For a description of what the above weapons were and why they were important see Appendix B.

alternated between frontline combat and brief periods of rest behind the lines. At the end of this period only 293 men were still fit for combat.<sup>55</sup>

These conditions were experienced by practically all of infantry on both sides of the war, who suffered through cold, wet trenches, heavy shellfire, disease, and criminally heavy casualties regardless of nationality or race. But for the underequipped and unprepared Gurkhas, conditions were particularly devastating. Despite this the Gurkhas continually impressed fellow soldiers and French citizens alike with their bravery, good humor, and ability to take extreme hardship without complaint. A British officer remarked on the conditions the Indian Army was fighting in:

Little Gurkhas slopping through the freezing mud barefooted. Tommies [British soldiers] with no caps on and plastered with mud and blood from head to foot, Sikhs with their hair all down and looking more wild and weird than I have ever seen them... misery depicted in their faces. I stopped some Gurkhas and asked why they walked in bare feet. Those that replied said ‘Sahib, our feet hurt terribly, but in boots they hurt worse.’<sup>56</sup>

The sacrifice of the Gurkhas on the western front was best represented on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1915. This was the date of the first ever Victorian Cross granted to a Gurkha soldier (as supposed to a British officer in a Gurkha Regiment). Rifleman Kulibir Thapa was the recipient, after being wounded and trapped behind German lines he managed to save one British and two Gurkha soldiers, all of whom were wounded. He was celebrated in an article of the *London Gazette*, the full text of which can be found on page seven. The article doesn't mention that 86 out of the 120 men of Thapa's company were killed or wounded that day.<sup>57</sup>

In late September of 1915 the Indian Army's role in the western front was largely over. Britain's new volunteer army was finally ready for service, and the poorly equipped and much depleted India Corps could finally be withdrawn. They had managed to hold out against the better-equipped German army long enough to be replaced, and had paid a horrific price in doing so. Despite their sacrifice, the Gurkhas' experiences in The Great War were far from over.

In October of 1914 the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Germans. In response the British high command developed a plan to take the Dardanelles, the narrow strait separating Turkey from the rest of Europe. In order to open the strait the British needed to control the Gallipoli peninsula that runs parallel to the strait. The invasion force consisted of an Australian and New Zealand Corps, a French force, a British Division, and the 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade composed of the 1/6<sup>th</sup>, 1/5<sup>th</sup>, and 2/10<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas. The first landings took place on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1915, and from the start the campaign was a bloody disaster. Attacking British troops and their allies were forced to charge up steep cliff faces into Turkish machine gun and artillery fire. All three Gurkha battalions were heavily involved in the fighting, and were twice used in successful night attacks against cliff faces the Turks had assumed were unassailable.<sup>58</sup> On August 9<sup>th</sup> the 1/6<sup>th</sup> managed to temporarily take Hill Q, a key Turkish defensive position. On taking the hill,

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<sup>55</sup> Parker: 1999, 101-102.

<sup>56</sup> Captian Grimshaw, cited in Bellamy: 2011, 162.

<sup>57</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 167.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 172.

however, the Gurkhas were hit by “friendly” shellfire and were forced to retreat.<sup>59</sup> If the hill had been held it is possible that the entire Turkish force would have retreated, and its loss was one of many missed opportunities of the campaign. In November of 1914 it became obvious to British high command that the campaign was a failure, and by January 9<sup>th</sup> the Royal Navy had evacuated the last allied personnel. The invasion force suffered between 205,000 and 250,000 casualties out of 410,000 deployed, and some of the Gurkha battalions had less than ten percent of their original complement intact after the withdrawal.<sup>60</sup>

The Gurkhas also fought in the Middle East, where they were part of the British force that fought against the Ottoman Empire and captured Bagdad on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1917. Although this campaign received little recognition compared to the western front, it was essential in leading to the eventual collapse of the Ottoman Empire. A small number of Gurkhas served with Lawrence of Arabia in North Africa, where they attacked Turkish patrols and bombed rail lines.

On November 11<sup>th</sup> 1918, the First World War officially ended. At the time it was the bloodiest conflict that had ever been fought, and more than five and a half million men lost their lives in it. The Gurkhas had never before set foot in Europe. They had no concept of why the war was fought, and no attachment to the Empire they fought for. Nevertheless the Gurkhas impressed nearly everyone they came into contact with through their courage, good cheer, and ability to bear hardship that crippled many European Regiments. At the end of the conflict the Gurkhas had suffered 20,000 casualties, of which at least 6,342 were fatalities.<sup>61</sup> At the time most of those affected by the conflict named it The War to End All Wars. None of them could have predicted that just twenty years later an even deadlier conflict would take place across an even greater world stage. It would be a conflict in which the Gurkhas would once again be called upon to demonstrate their fighting skills and devotion to the British Crown.

Prior to their celebrated involvement in the Second World War, the Gurkhas were called upon for a much less distinguished role. On May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1919 the Afghan national army invaded the mountainous border between Afghanistan and British India in an effort to win back the tribal lands lost to the British in the previous war. This sparked the Third Afghan War, and though it was mercifully short (it ended on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1919) it was an incredibly bloody affair, and the Gurkhas were at the forefront of the campaign. Nor did the British victory end the fighting on the North West frontier, which would continue to plague the British until Indian independence in 1947. In addition to fighting as regular infantry the Gurkhas served as special scouts – what we would now term a special force role. It was the same tasks they had preformed in the previous Afghan War: reconnaissance, counter-sniping, and picketing.<sup>62</sup> These jobs were difficult indeed, requiring small isolated groups of men to negotiate hostile countryside in silence, laying ambushes for Afghan snipers and screening the movements of British and Indian Regiments.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 176. Just exactly who fired the shells that drove the Gurkhas off Hill Q is widely debated to this day.

<sup>60</sup> Parker: 1999, 126.

<sup>61</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 192.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 204. In this context ‘picketing’ means occupying the heights so that a column of troops or supplies can pass below without being ambushed. It was a task the Gurkhas were commonly used for because of their speed and dexterity when climbing mountains. For a full definition see glossary.

The costs of such actions were high, and the brutality and horror of the conflict have been well documented, if little remembered by those who were not there.

In one action in November 1921 the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkhas were deployed with several British units to Dardoni, an abandoned fort surrounded by hostile countryside. One day several weeks into the deployment Company A of the Gurkha battalion was picketing a surrounding hillside while a supply column passed below. The company became isolated, and was attacked without warning by tribesmen firing from unseen positions. Severely outnumbered, the survivors of the company were forced to withdraw from the hill leaving a large number of wounded behind. Captain Charles John Morris, the company commander, went to the Colonel in command of the fort and begged him to send a force to rescue the wounded. With darkness approaching and without a significantly large force to avoid meeting the same fate, the colonel refused. Captain Morris describes what happened next:

... In the far distance I could discern a cloud of vultures hovering in the sky; they were waiting for the moment of death. I stood there a long time watching the shadows lengthen, thinking and yet not thinking, physically numbed and unable to move away. As dusk was falling I noticed a solitary figure, moving very slowly and apparently with great difficulty. As he came near I recognized one of my own men. He was stark naked. He had been knifed in the belly and his testicles slashed. They now hung by bleeding threads of sinew. He was unable to speak and collapsed as soon as we carried him into the camp.

I knew this would be the fate of all the others and I went once more to see the Colonel, although even I knew that night was too near for anything to be done. He spoke to me with great kindness. 'I know only too well what will happen to your men,' he said. 'You do not have to remind me. But we must wait. There is nothing more we can do until tomorrow'...

Early the next morning we went back. The dead lay scattered in small groups, and it was obvious from their postures that except for the fortunate few who had been killed instantly every man had been subjected to the most barbarous treatment when he was still alive. The bodies had been stripped and in every case the genitals had been roughly severed and stuffed into the victim's mouth. This act, the greatest insult a Moslem can offer to a Hindu or other so-called infidel, is believed by the tribesmen to deny the rewards of paradise.<sup>63</sup>

The North Western and to a lesser extent North Eastern (Burmese) theaters kept the Gurkhas and busy throughout the 1920s and 30s. During this period the Gurkhas were periodically used for crowd control as well, as the burgeoning Indian independence movement began to gather steam. At this point the Gurkhas were known throughout England, largely as a result of the First World War. Their actions in the Second would catapult them onto the world stage.

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<sup>63</sup> Morris, Charles J, *Hired to Kill*, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 206.

## Decline of an Empire: The Second World War and Indian Independence

If the origins of the First World War are complex and still debated, the origins of the Second are relatively straightforward. After defeat Germany had lost all of its overseas possessions, forced to accept full blame for the war, and pay massive amounts of money to the victorious powers. This combined with the Great Depression in the early 1930s that destroyed Germany's economy and discredited its new government. These conditions allowed for the rise of fascism and Adolf Hitler, who promised economic recovery and a path to regain national pride. After coming to power in 1933 Hitler embarked on a massive rearmament campaign. In 1939 Germany and the new USSR (after the communist revolution in Russia in 1918) agreed to split Poland between them and invaded. France and Great Britain declared war on Germany, and Italy (angry over its treatment after World War One) declared war on them. Meanwhile in 1931 Japan had invaded China as part of its aggressive expansion in the Pacific. In response America imposed crippling sanctions on the Japanese, and on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the Japanese attacked the American navel base at Pearl Harbor, and America and Great Britain declared war on the Japanese.

Initially the war went disastrously for the allied powers. Brilliant German attacks into France combined with incompetent French and British command led to the surrender of the French on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1940 and the evacuation of all British personal from mainland Europe. One effect of this crushing defeat was that the British requested permission from the Nepalese government to raise ten new battalions of Gurkhas. Judha Shamsheer – then ruler of Nepal – agreed, and famously said, “If you win we will win with you. If you lose, we will lose with you.”<sup>64</sup>

This led to a sudden recruiting spree throughout Nepal and thousands of young Nepalese men, many of whom had never before left their villages, suddenly found themselves in the completely foreign environment of the British army. Rifleman Chamar Gurung's story is typical of the new Gurkha recruits. He joined on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 1940 after recruiters went to his village and promised great wealth and glory for those who served the British Empire. Chamar Gurung was sent to India for a brief training period before joining the 2/2th Gurkhas. He was deployed with his battalion to Malaya after the Japanese attacked it in December of 1941. There he was subjected to almost daily Japanese air and ground attacks. He recalls one time when the Japanese threw grenades into his foxhole and he had mere seconds to find them and throw them back before they went off. After the British were driven out of Malaya Chamar Gurung was deployed to Singapore, where he fought for several months, again under daily Japanese air attacks. On February 15<sup>th</sup> 1942 Singapore surrendered to the Japanese in the worst defeat in the history of the British Empire, and Chamar Gurung joined over 130,000 other allied personnel as a prisoner of the Japanese. He remained a prisoner for the next three and a half years, and was not released until September of 1945. During that time he says he was given only one loaf of bread for a nine-day period, and was forced to transport coal for the Japanese. He says that anyone who refused to work or talk back was beaten severely, and that by the time he was released he was completely starved.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Shamsheer, Judha, attributed by Lieutenant General Sir Francis Taker in *Gorkha: The story of the Gurkhas of Nepal*, 213, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 214.

<sup>65</sup> Rifleman Chaman Gurung (retired), from an interview at the Gurkha Welfare Scheme's residential home in Pokhara, Nepal on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013. This interview and the subsequent two were only possible through the generous assistance of Major Krishna Gurung (retired), senior welfare officer at the

Chamar Gurung's story was unfortunately common for allied soldiers serving in the Pacific in early 1942. The Americans and British had badly underestimated the size and tactical skill of the Japanese, and were soon retreating everywhere. The Japanese quickly captured Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), French Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), and the Philippines. On January 19<sup>th</sup> 1942 the Japanese attacked British-controlled Burma, and one of the responding units was the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, which included the 1/3<sup>rd</sup>, 1/4<sup>th</sup>, and 2/5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Battalions serving in the all Gurkha 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 1/7<sup>th</sup> and 3/7<sup>th</sup> Battalions in other brigades.<sup>66</sup> On the night of February 19<sup>th</sup> the Japanese attacked through the jungle, successfully flanking the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. The Division was forced to withdraw across a single railroad bridge, and though the 1/4<sup>th</sup> made it across most of the 1/3<sup>rd</sup>, 2/5<sup>th</sup>, 1/7<sup>th</sup>, and 3/7<sup>th</sup> were stuck on the wrong side. At 0530 hours on February 23<sup>rd</sup> the division commander ordered the bridge blown, afraid that the Japanese would capture it otherwise. Altogether 2,500 men were killed or forced to surrender, two thirds of them Gurkhas.<sup>67</sup>

The British forces in Burma did not collapse like those in Singapore or Malaya, in part because of the inspired leadership of Lieutenant General William Slim, commander of the allied forces in Burma (and former commander of the 2/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas). Indeed the British did have several tactical successes, such as on the April 28<sup>th</sup> when the reformed 48<sup>th</sup> Brigade was attacked by the 18<sup>th</sup> Japanese Division near Kyaukse. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Brigade held against three successive attacks, then counterattacked and recaptured a nearby town. The Brigade lost ten men, the Japanese lost 500, and the victory bought the Brigade time to withdraw in good order.<sup>68</sup> And withdraw they did, for despite minor victories such as these it soon became clear that the British position in Burma was untenable. They accomplished this retreat through heavy jungle in relative order, and by May 21<sup>st</sup> the last British troops had safely crossed into India.

The Gurkha presence in Burma was far from over, however, and while the majority of British troops rested and recovered in India some Gurkhas prepared to return on the attack. They were from the newly raised 3/2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkha Rifles, and took part in the very first Chindit force. The Chindits were a mix of British Commandos, Gurkhas, and Burmese troops who were formed to operate behind Japanese lines to disrupt supply and tie up troops. The first Chindit incursion began on February 6<sup>th</sup> 1943 and comprised 3,000 men, about half of whom were Gurkhas. It accomplished its objective of blowing Japanese rail lines, but after twelve weeks of constant combat and marches through the jungle only two thirds of the force made it back.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the heavy losses the Chindits continued to grow and operate, and by March of 1944 the 3/4<sup>th</sup>, 3/6<sup>th</sup>, 3/9<sup>th</sup>, and 4/9<sup>th</sup> were all a part of the Special Forces unit when it was involved in its most important role. The British were finally ready to attack into India, and on March 5<sup>th</sup> the Chindits landed via glider at three sites deep inside Japanese territory. They built airfields and

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home, and Captain Sumi P Tamang (retired) and Mr. Purma B Rana, both staff at the home who assisted with translations.

<sup>66</sup> Bellamy:2011, 215.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 217.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 218.

<sup>69</sup> Parker: 1999: 193.

established secure perimeters, allowing reinforcements to be flow in. By March 13<sup>th</sup> there were 13,000 men and a squadron of RAF fighter aircraft in the Japanese rear.<sup>70</sup>

Meanwhile the Gurkhas had been fighting in their more traditional role of riflemen as well, defending India against Japanese attacks from Burma and subsequently counterattacking. In the battle of Imphal Plain in India the Gurkhas won three Victorian Crosses within a few kilometers of one another. By July 8<sup>th</sup> the Japanese were withdrawing and the British followed, finally entering Burma in force.

Rifleman Bhanbda Gurung was a part of this defense of India and invasion of Burma. He joined in November of 1942 and spent ten months training in India before joining the 1/5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles. He fought in India for over a year against the Japanese invasion and then spent several more fighting in Burma before being withdrawn in late 1944. After more than seventy years Gurung's memories are somewhat jumbled, devoid of specific locations or the identity of the enemy units (though it's also quite possible he was never aware of either). Gurung remembers one particularly fierce battle around a bridge somewhere in Burma where his Brigade was advancing when it was attacked by a massive force of Japanese. He describes heavy fighting for days around the bridge, where first one then the other side would attack through thick jungle while artillery fell indiscriminately on both sides. It was a universal experience for the common infantryman in any army at the time, bloody, close-range killing, often without any context or operational understanding. It was a job at which the Gurkhas inarguably excelled.

The Burma campaign didn't fully end until Japanese surrender on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1945 but by May 1<sup>st</sup> the British had retaken Rangoon, the capital of Burma, and surrounded the Japanese forces. Over the course of the campaign 23 out of 45 Gurkha battalions had served Burma, a total of 35,000 men. They and their British officers won nine Victorian Crosses and along with the rest of the British forces had managed to inflict 150,000 fatalities on the Japanese army, destroying a significant portion of it.<sup>71</sup> The Gurkhas had fought brilliantly in difficult jungle conditions, and they had paid the price for their success. Rifleman Bhakta B Sunuwar is an example, formerly of the tenth Gurkha Rifles. Bhakta Sunuwar has now passed away but Padam Kumari Sunuwar, his widow, told me of how he had returned to their village after three years of fighting. Bhakta Sunuwar was serving in Burma when he was hit by a bomb blast and badly injured in the leg and back. His comrades carried him through kilometers of dense jungle to an aid station, saving his life. The wound never fully healed, however, and Bhakta Sunuwar was forced to retire from military service and return to his village in Olkadamba, Nepal without pension or disability assistance.

Gurkhas were involved in heavy fighting in North Africa and Italy as well, where they took part in one of the deadliest British battles of the war. The 2/4<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas were sent as part of a force to hold the critical port of Tobruk and when it fell they became German prisoners. The 1/2<sup>nd</sup> was much more effective, fighting under Montgomery during his 1943 attack. They took a critical mountain on his flank, charging machine gun positions with khukuris and bayonets, then holding the mountain against German counterattacks.<sup>72</sup> After Rommel's Africa Corps surrendered in

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<sup>70</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 229.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 243.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 245.

May of 1943 the Gurkhas were involved in the Italian campaign. Italy had surrendered as soon as allied troops invaded, but German soldiers remained, and established several strong defensive positions in the Italian mountains. One of these was the abandoned monastery of Monte Cassino. It was bombed to rubble by the RAF, but the Germans dug into the ruins and turned it into an almost impenetrable fortress. The Gurkhas arrived on February 11<sup>th</sup> 1944 as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, and on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> attacked. Both attacks failed, resulting in twenty percent casualties.<sup>73</sup> The Gurkhas were involved in combat in the area until May 14<sup>th</sup>, when a Polish Division finally took the position. The Gurkhas were in constant combat this entire time, and managed to take and hold several surrounding heights, losing 4,000 men in the process. The Gurkhas continued fighting in Italy until the war in Europe ended on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945, and in the Pacific until September 2<sup>nd</sup> when the Japanese surrendered. At the start of the Second World War there were 18,000 Gurkhas serving in the British Army. At its end there were more than 97,000. They suffered 23,647 casualties including 8,980 fatalities.<sup>74</sup>

Even after the official Japanese surrender the Gurkhas were employed in post-conflict roles. This involved disarming Japanese units and reoccupying colonies the Japanese had taken, which often resulted in armed combat. Colonel John Cross (retired), a former British officer who commanded Gurkhas for much of his military career, remembers being sent to South Vietnam (then still part of French Indochina) with a small contingent of Gurkhas after the Second World War to disarm two Japanese battalions and provide security until the French reoccupied the country. When the Vietminh (the precursors to the Vietcong) started launching attacks against the occupation forces, Colonel Cross – then just a junior officer – was ordered to *rearm* the Japanese battalions and command them and his Gurkhas in combat operations against the Vietminh.<sup>75</sup> This sort of conflict was not uncommon as Britain and the other European powers reoccupied their former colonies and discovered that not all of them wanted to return to European control. It was not bloodless either, and 2,136 Gurkhas lost their lives in operations such as this one, though few back in Britain knew it.<sup>76</sup> One of the most long lasting effects of the Second World War was that with the European Powers exhausted and bankrupt these colonies would not remain in European control for long.

The Indian independence movement had been building long before the Second World War. The British government had faced regional unrest throughout its occupation of India, but around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this unrest became an organized, national movement. By the end of the Second World War it became obvious that the question was not if India would become independent, but how and when it would happen. Among the problems with this transformation to independence, the question of what would happen to the Gurkhas was relatively minor. Nevertheless it generated great debate within the British High Command. Some believed that there was no more need for the Gurkhas, but those who recognized the devotion, bravery, and relative cheapness of the Gurkhas largely outnumbered them. In November of 1946 Field Marshal Auchinleck suggested to the war office that a Gurkha Division similar to the French Foreign Legion be created. This would have required twelve Gurkha battalions or 25,000 men total to remain with the British, and some would have had to be trained as engineers and

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 250.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 255.

<sup>75</sup> From an interview with Colonel John Cross (retired) at his home in Pokhara on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>76</sup> Bellamy:2011, 260.



artillerymen. Unfortunately for the British the Indian government – already anticipating a war with Pakistan – wanted the Gurkhas too.

A compromise was reached in late 1947 in which the British retained eight battalions in four regiments, while the remaining seven regiments were transferred to India. The compromise was formalized on November 9<sup>th</sup> 1947 in the Tripartite Agreement between India, Nepal, and Great Britain.<sup>77</sup> The seven Indian Gurkha regiments changed their name to Gorkha, and went on to fight brilliantly in the First Indian-Pakistani war and most of India's subsequent conflicts. The four remaining British Gurkha regiments – the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 10<sup>th</sup> – were moved to Singapore, Malaya, and Hong Kong, where they would find plenty of subsequent employment.

### **Gurkhas in the Post Colonial World**

For the former colonies of Great Britain in Asia, decolonization was not a peaceful process. Within weeks of independence India and Pakistan were at war, and the conflict escalated so rapidly there were still British officers serving as advisors to both sides when the conflict began.<sup>78</sup> The British never intervened militarily in this war, but were soon caught up in another conflict in Southeast Asia. During the Second World War the Japanese had captured Malaya, and in response the British had funded and supported the Malay People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). After the Japanese defeat the British moved back into Malaya and attempted to disband the MPAJA, but as in Vietnam many within the force were just as opposed to recolonization as they were to the Japanese. Chin Peng, Secretary-General of the Malayan Communist Party began an armed insurrection against the British, and on June 17<sup>th</sup> 1948 the British declared the Malayan Emergency in response. Fortunately for the British, six of the remaining eight Gurkha Battalions had been deployed to Malaya just prior to the start of the emergency, and so were on hand to rapidly respond.<sup>79</sup> The insurgents – named Communist Terrorists or CTs by the British – numbered about 5,000 men with significant jungle warfare experience, trained and supplied by the Chinese.<sup>80</sup> To combat them the British set out on a twofold strategy of separating the CTs from the villages that served as their bases of supply by winning the hearts and minds of the villagers, and attacking them directly through long-range jungle patrols. The Gurkhas were heavily involved in these patrols, and would often march through the jungle for six weeks at a time, carrying 36 kilograms (80 pounds) a person and relying on airdrops for resupply. During this time the Gurkhas frequently worked alongside British Special Air Service (SAS) squadrons, who were (and still are) widely regarded as the Britain's most elite Special Forces.<sup>81</sup>

It took thousands of these joint patrols, but by 1955 the CTs were largely contained to the deepest corners of the Malayan jungle. On August 31<sup>st</sup> 1957 Malaya achieved independence, though the Gurkhas remained to support and train the new Malayan army. On August 1<sup>st</sup> 1960

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>78</sup> From my November 10<sup>th</sup> interview with Colonel Cross. Colonel Cross was one of those officers on the Indian side, and he recalls that he and his fellow officers were given strict orders not to enter the disputed territory of Kashmir to avoid situations where British would be fighting British.

<sup>79</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 292.

<sup>80</sup> Parker: 1999, 231.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 235.

the Malayan Emergency was officially declared over, and the conflict remains the only example in history where a European colonial power successfully defeated a communist insurrection.<sup>82</sup> In large part this was due to the Gurkhas' ability to remain in the jungles for months at a time, patiently enduring leeches, mosquitoes, thick terrain, and poor rations to ambush and destroy the CTs.

The Emergency might have ended in Malaya in mid 1960 but the Gurkhas involvement there did not. In 1961 Colonel John Cross was sent back to Malaya with two companies of the 1/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles as part of a Malayan Brigade charged with killing or capturing around 35 Chinese Guerillas fighting against the government. Again the Gurkhas would take part in several month-long patrols, surviving on one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of food for a six-day period. Many of these arduous patrols would result in no contact at all, and the Gurkhas would return to their camps exhausted and sickly with nothing to show for it.<sup>83</sup> Eventually though the Chinese were killed, captured, or dispersed, largely a result of the Gurkhas managing to win the trust of the villagers in the surrounding area. It was an almost completely unknown and uncelebrated operation, but one that highlighted the Gurkhas discipline, toughness, and humanity when dealing with locals while serving in absolutely horrendous conditions.

The Gurkhas next major action took place in the tiny independent state of Brunei in late 1962. Brunei is a tiny nation (its current population is just over 400,000) located to the north of the Malaysian portion of the island of Borneo. It was (and still is) ruled by a sultanate, and despite its small size and population is an important economic power in the region due to its oilfields.<sup>84</sup> On December 8<sup>th</sup> 1962 a rebellion broke out against the Sultan of Brunei and the 1/2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkha Battalion was deployed to contain it along with several other British forces. They quickly brought the rebellion under control, and the Sultan was so impressed that he requested that a battalion of British Gurkhas be posted to Brunei indefinitely. The British agreed, and ever since a battalion of Gurkhas has been deployed in Brunei on a rotating basis at the Sultan's expense, something that has undoubtedly contributed to the continued existence of the Gurkhas.<sup>85</sup>

The Gurkhas also played an important role in the crisis between Malaysia and Indonesia after the creation of the state of Malaysia in August of 1963. The Indonesians had wanted to incorporate Malaya into an Indonesian dominated superstate, and failing this they wanted control over the whole of Borneo, the largest island in Asia. Following the incorporation of northern Borneo into Malaysia, Indonesia broke all trade and diplomatic relations with Malaysia, and soon began cross border raids using the North Kalimantan National Army (TNKU) heavily supported by the Indonesian regular army.<sup>86</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas were once again deployed, and were formed into a border scouts unit alongside native infantry and the SAS to contain and destroy these raiding parties. Then Major Cross had command of this force (with the exception of the SAS units), and it is representative of the pace of the conflict that over the course of ten months he was never in one place for more than three days.<sup>87</sup> In 1964 the border scouts began mounting raids on the

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<sup>82</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 294.

<sup>83</sup> From my November 10<sup>th</sup> interview with Colonel Cross.

<sup>84</sup> CIA World Factbook: accessed November 25<sup>th</sup> 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Menon: 1988, 309.

<sup>86</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 299.

<sup>87</sup> From my November 10<sup>th</sup> interview with Colonel Cross.

Indonesian side of the border to disrupt the TNKU's base of operations. This often led to small but vicious firefights in the jungle, and by the time the confrontation ended in March of 1966 the Gurkhas had lost 40 men, and suffered another 83 wounded.<sup>88</sup>

In 1955 the Gurkhas withdrew from Singapore after it gained independence, though ever since Gurkhas have served in the Singapore police force. In 1971 the last Gurkhas left Malaysia, and their only remaining operational center (other than the battalion in Brunei) was Hong Kong. They accomplished a critical job there in 1982 where they restored order in the wake of a massive refugee crisis created by a regime change in China, but when it became clear that Hong Kong would be returned to the Chinese, the question of what would happen to the Gurkhas became prominent. The total strength of the unit had already been cut to 6,700 in 1966, but by the early 1980s there were repeated and serious calls for the full disbandment of the Gurkhas, who were seen as obsolete by some within the British government.

One event that may have saved the Gurkhas was the Falklands War, which broke out on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1982. The 1/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas was part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade sent to the Falklands in response, and though the unit did not see much actual combat they did receive a massive amount of publicity. This was mainly aimed at the young Argentina soldiers, and was full of reports about how brutal and merciless the Gurkhas were in battle.<sup>89</sup> Whether or not this propaganda actually unhinged the Argentinians is up for debate, but it certainly caught the attention of the British public. When the battalion returned it was to a hero's welcome from the British public.<sup>90</sup> The sudden upsurge in public support may have contributed to the continued survival of the Gurkhas, though a review into their ongoing viability was nevertheless conducted in 1988.<sup>91</sup> It is a testament to how uncertain the Gurkhas' future was that a 1988 academic paper on the security situation in Southeast Asia devoted several pages to analyzing how the security of Brunei would change if the Gurkha battalion stationed there was disbanded.<sup>92</sup>

A compromise was reached on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1989, when then Defense Secretary George Younger outlined in an announcement that the Gurkhas would be cut to 4,000 men serving in four rifle battalions plus the Queen's Gurkha Engineers, Queens Gurkha Signals, and the Gurkha Transport (later the Queen's Own Gurkha Logistics Regiment).<sup>93</sup> The announcement insured that the Gurkhas would continue to exist into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, albeit at a much reduced size. In fact in 1994 the Gurkhas acquired a completely new role after the British Army began to experience extreme manpower shortages. These shortages were the result of not enough fit British men joining the armed forces, and in response a Gurkha reinforcement company was created and joined to the second Battalion of the Parachute Regiment.<sup>94</sup>

This newfound role of a strategic manpower reserve could not save the Gurkhas from further downsizing, and in 1994 the four Gurkha Regiments that had remained with the British after the

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<sup>88</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 303.

<sup>89</sup> Parker: 1999, 284.

<sup>90</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 309.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 310.

<sup>92</sup> Menon: 1988, 310-312.

<sup>93</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 310.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 313.

1947 split with India were merged into a single Royal Gurkha Rifles Regiment. This initially was comprised of three rifle Battalions, but after the long-anticipated handover of Hong Kong in 1997 this was further reduced to just two battalions.<sup>95</sup> Despite the cuts, the Gurkhas were still expected to perform.

The Gurkhas were heavily involved in the mass of postcolonial and post-Cold War conflicts that had sprung up in the early 1990s. They were deployed to Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and East Timor.<sup>96</sup> These deployments required high levels of intelligence and precision, since often the lines between combatants and non-combatants was blurred, and the Gurkhas were often operating under restrictive mandates on the use of force. These deployments more often were of the Logistic, Signals, and Engineer components of the Gurkhas than they were of the rifle battalions, and it highlighted a key advantage of the Gurkhas over regular British soldiers. While the British specialists (such as engineers) received only basic infantry training, the Gurkha specialists went through the full Gurkha nine month infantry training courses before gaining their specialist training.<sup>97</sup> This makes them well suited to deployment in post-conflict zones, since they can assist in developing local infrastructure (often a key component of such deployments) while maintaining the ability to defend themselves if needed. Gurkhas also took part in the 1991 First Iraq War, where a detachment of the Queens Gurkha Logistics was deployed as ambulance drivers.<sup>98</sup>

The Gurkhas biggest post reduction role was as part of the NATO Peace Implementation Force (IFOR) that went into Kosovo following the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords which ended the bloody Bosnian “civil war” (heavily influenced by neighboring Serbia and Croatia). The Royal Gurkha Rifles, the Queens Gurkha Engineers, and a squadron of the Queens Gurkha Signals were all deployed.<sup>99</sup> Indeed it was a company of the Royal Gurkha Rifles that was given the honor of being the very first NATO unit to enter Kosovo and secure the high ground.<sup>100</sup> Once deployed, the Gurkhas, along with the rest of IFOR, had the difficult job of preserving the peace and disarming the intermixed military forces without sparking a renewal to the conflict. It was a job they accomplished with the professionalism and attention to duty that all those associated with them had come to expect.

The Gurkhas’ military service continues up to the present day, and they have been deployed in the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Initially only a Gurkha reinforcement company attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Irish Regiment was deployed to Iraq, but they were followed by Gurkhas from the Engineer and Logistics units. In Afghanistan the Gurkhas have been even more heavily involved. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles was deployed there in 2003, to assist with security and the reconstruction effort.<sup>101</sup> An all Gurkha Battle group consisting of the

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<sup>95</sup> Parker: 1999, 313.

<sup>96</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 312.

<sup>97</sup> From an interview held on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013 with Lieutenant Colonel Elton Davis, Chief of Staff of British Gurkha Nepal, the headquarters for Gurkha recruitment and the Gurkha Welfare Scheme in Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>98</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 311.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>100</sup> Parker: 1999, xv.

<sup>101</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 318.

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles and detachments of the Queen's Gurkha Engineers, Logistics, and Signals was deployed there from September 2007 to April 2008, during which time the Gurkhas won a total of 19 awards for bravery and suffered 16 casualties, one of which was a fatality.<sup>102</sup> The two battalions alternated deployments in Afghanistan for several subsequent years, though neither is currently deployed.

So it is that the Gurkha's most recent deployment is almost exactly the same as their first back in 1840. Even their objectives are mostly the same, to train the Afghan Army, provide security around Kabul, and take part in reconstruction efforts. It is a deeply ironic continuation of the Gurkha's almost 200 years of service to the British Crown.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 319.

## *Gurkhas in the Modern World*

The Gurkha Pension Scheme is a very fair scheme, a view upheld by the Court of Appeal. For most Gurkhas it provides a pension of at least as good, and in many cases better, than that given to their British counterparts with identical periods of service.<sup>103</sup>

An Unnamed Ministry of Defense Spokesman

We have fought for their empire for two centuries. Now we are fighting for equal rights... we have been discriminated against by the British government since we joined.<sup>104</sup>

Rajen Raj Rai, Ex-Gurkha and Secretary of the British Gurkha Struggle Committee, protesting outside the British Embassy in Kathmandu, November 20<sup>th</sup> 2013



Figure 3

<sup>103</sup> An unknown Ministry of Defense spokesman quoted in Tom Coghlan's September 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 article, "Gurkhas Vow 'Hunger Strike to Death' on Pensions".

<sup>104</sup> Rajen Raj Rai, Secretary of the British Gurkha Struggle Committee, from an interview held outside the British embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2013.

## The Brigade of Gurkhas

The current strength of the Brigade of Gurkhas is 2,900 men, 200 over the established level of 2,700. This disparity is due to the number of Gurkhas serving in reinforcement companies to make up manpower shortages in the rest of the British army. This strength will be reduced to 2,500 sometime in the next few years, and is expected to maintain that level for some time barring fresh cuts to the British military budget or a major conflict involving the United Kingdom. These Gurkhas are divided among the two remaining battalions of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, the Queen's Gurkha Signals, the Queen's Gurkha Engineers, and The Queen's Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment.<sup>105</sup> With the exception of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Gurkha Rifles – which is currently stationed in Brunei – the Brigade is deployed within the United Kingdom.

Recruitment today is “Free, Fair, and Transparent” – the slogan that adorns the Pokhara recruitment center and the British Gurkha Nepal headquarters in Kathmandu. The British are now committed to recruiting any Nepalese who can pass selection without regard to their ethnic or caste origins. Despite this the overwhelming majority of those who pass the final central selection are from the same “martial tribes” originally recruited by the British.<sup>106</sup>

The selection process goes through three distinct phases. The first is registration, which takes place across the country and requires applicants to pass minimal educational requirements including math and English classes, perform a minimum of eight heaves (pull-ups) in under a minute, and present valid documentation of age and Nepalese citizenship. Possessing any tattoos, wearing glasses or contacts, weighing under 50 kilograms (110 pounds), being under 158 centimeters (5.18 feet) tall, or being under 17 and a half or over 21 years of age are all grounds for immediate disqualification.<sup>107</sup>

Of the over 8,000 applicants who show up to registration, only 800 or so will make it to the second phase, known as regional selection. This is held in Pokhara in the west and Dharan in the east, and takes place over the course of several days. Applicants are required to perform a minimum of 12 heaves, 70 sit-ups in fewer than two minutes, and an 800-meter run in less than 2 minutes 45 seconds. They also have to pass a medical physical and written math and English tests, and go through one-on-one interviews in English and Nepalese.<sup>108</sup>

The final stage in the recruitment process is central selection, which takes place in Pokhara and lasts for two to three weeks. Only 300 are called to central selection (150 from each regional center), and for the current batch of applicants only 126 will eventually be selected. At central selection applicants undergo a full medical, must be able to run 2.4 kilometers (1.5 miles) in under 9 minutes 40 seconds, and perform the Doko, a 5 kilometer (3.1 mile) run with 25 kilograms (55 pounds) on a head sling uphill in under 48 minutes. Applicants also undergo more advanced English and Math tests, and further English and Nepalese interviews.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> All of the above from my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

<sup>106</sup> For a full breakdown of ethnic groups recruited by percent see Appendix C.

<sup>107</sup> Pandey: 2013, 32.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 33. For a sample of the written tests for regional selection see Appendix D.

<sup>109</sup> From my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

In order to increase their chances of success many applicants to the Gurkhas now attend specialized training academies, which claim to prepare applicants for all phases of the selection process. None of the training academies are sanctioned or supported by the British, but Lieutenant Colonel Davis admitted that the majority of successful applicants now attend one. Mr. Rahul Pandey runs one such academy named Salute Gorkha located in Pokhara. Mr. Pandey has experience with the British Gurkha recruitment process; he made it to central selection three times himself but was never chosen. At his center applicants undergo six months of intensive physical training, take math and English classes, and go through practice interviews in Nepalese and English. The academy also shows films provided by British Gurkha Nepal and assists its students in preparing their paperwork. The applicants pay dearly for the classes. The six-month course at Salute Gorkha costs 25,000 Nepalese Rupees (250 US dollars at 2013 exchange rates) not including room or board.<sup>110</sup> Some of the training academies are even pricier, and provide fewer services. Though not a lot of money by western standards, it requires many Nepalese families to go into debt to send their sons to an academy, and even successfully completing one of these programs is certainly no guaranty of eventual success in joining the Gurkhas. Mr. Pandey claims that 30 percent of his students will make it into either the British Gurkhas or the Singapore police Gurkha contingent, though this number is impossible to verify.

For those that fail to get into the Gurkhas there are other options; including reapplying the next year (assuming the applicant will still be under 21), joining the Indian Gorkhas, or joining the Nepalese army. Mr. Pandey says that about half of his students will follow one of these careers after being rejected by the British. For the rest there's the possibility of service with either an international private security company or the French Foreign Legion, and Mr. Pandey arranges interviews with these organizations for his unsuccessful students. Those that cannot get into these fields are often forced into the construction sector abroad, a dismal prospect as these jobs pay less and are have more hazardous working conditions then serving with the Gurkhas.

### **Evolving Perceptions of the Gurkhas**

Just what is it that convinces thousands of young Nepalese men to pay the heavy entrance fees to these training academies for the microscopic opportunity to join the British Brigade of Gurkhas? What is the overriding international perception of the Gurkhas? For most of the former group, it's "the fame and the name" of the Gurkhas, and the economic security that comes with acceptance.<sup>111</sup> Several students at the Salute Gorkha training academy told me that they wanted to join the British army because of its renown, the skills it provides them, and the ability it gives them to support their families and further their own ambitions.<sup>112</sup> Bisal Tamang, a 19 year-old student of Salute Gorkha summed up his reasons for wanting to join as:

The British Army is the best trained and equipped in the world. It fights for freedom and security in the world. It is our duty to take the Gurkha legacy forward and continue our grandfathers' service... Also the money it provides us will allow us to support our family.

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<sup>110</sup> From an interview with Mr. Rahul Pandey conducted on November 26<sup>th</sup> 2013 in Pokhara, Nepal.

<sup>111</sup> Quote from Mr. Pandey who gave it as his personal motivation for wanting to join.

<sup>112</sup> From interviews conducted on November 27, 2013 at the Salute Gorkha Pokhara center with three students: Sunil Buddhmagar, Bisal Tamang, and Saljein Rai.



This is most likely a speech Bisal Tamang was practicing for when a British officer asks the same question during selection, but his opinion was in some form or another expressed by all of Bisal Tamang's peers I talked to.

But what of the international community? How do they perceive the Gurkhas? The international view of the Gurkhas is as much a product of the literature that has been produced on them as it is their actual history. Most accounts – be they modern or historical – on the Gurkhas focuses on two of their most famous traits. This is their bravery and their loyalty to their British officers. Much of this perception of the Gurkhas comes from the writings of their British officers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These writings are remarkably similar in tone, which one Asian studies scholar labels romantic approval.<sup>113</sup> They take great pains to distinguish the Gurkhas from the Indian Sepoys, whom most British officers despised. Thus a common depiction of Indian Sepoys of the time is that they lacked, “those essential qualities without which men cannot be soldiers: bravery and bodily strength”.<sup>114</sup> In comparison the Gurkhas are described as being, “by far the best soldiers in India [with] unadulterated military habits”.<sup>115</sup>

The two positive characteristics that convinced the British of the Gurkha's superiority to the Sepoys were their bravery and loyalty, the two traits of the Gurkhas that have been publicized ever since. The idea as Gurkhas as the “bravest of the brave” has its origins in the martial race theory propagated in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued to this day. This theory holds that some races are inherently superior in armed conflict than others, and though the theory has largely gone out of style within European intellectual debate, many within Nepal continue to hold this belief.<sup>116</sup> This would seem to be supported by the modern composition of successful Gurkha recruits, the overwhelming majority of whom are from traditionally recruited ethnic groups despite Britain's commitment to recruit any Nepalese citizen who can make it through selection.<sup>117</sup>

A possible explanation for this phenomenon, however, is that within Nepal not everyone knows they can apply to be a Gurkha. Mr. Pandey missed his first opportunity to apply for the Gurkhas because his older brother had told him that only Gurungs and Limbus were eligible to become Gurkhas.<sup>118</sup> This occurred in 2005 – long after the British allowed all Nepalese ethnic groups to become Gurkhas – and suggests that one reason the traditionally recruited ethnic groups continue to be the ones selected is that they are the only ones who know to apply. Whether the martial race theory has any factual basis behind it or not; that the Gurkhas have consistently preformed incredible feats of bravery throughout their history is undeniable. It is worth considering, however, whether this distinguished record is a result of the inherent characteristics of the

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<sup>113</sup> Caplan: 1999, 573.

<sup>114</sup> Carnaticus: 1821, 429, quoted in Caplan: 1999, 578.

<sup>115</sup> Hodgson: 1833, 220, quoted in Caplan: 1999, 581.

<sup>116</sup> For examples Major Krishna and Colonel Cross both told me that they believe this theory is at least partially true, insofar as there is something special about the castes traditionally recruited as Gurkhas that makes them superior fighters.

<sup>117</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>118</sup> From my November 26<sup>th</sup> interview with Mr. Pandey.

Gurkhas or whether it is a result of the intense training they go through, their pride in their units, and their experiences sustaining hardship in their villages.

The other characteristic most commonly attributed to the Gurkhas is their loyalty to their British officers and to the crown. This had its origins in the Gurkhas' crucial role in the Sepoy Mutiny, where not a single Gurkha battalion went over to the mutineers. Like their reputation for bravery, the Gurkhas' loyalty throughout history is beyond question. Unfortunately, accounts of the Gurkhas' loyalty have traditionally been couched in colonial and condescending language. There is a historic trend among many of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century authors on the Gurkhas to refer to them as halfway between men and children, with the potential to become excellent soldiers, provided they are kept in line by their British officers.<sup>119</sup> As the Colonel of one Gurkha Regiment said:

The temperament of the Gurkha reminds one of our public schoolboy. The same light-hearted cheerfulness, hatred of injustice, love of games, and veneration for superior ability or skill. There is the same mentality, with dogged affection (if well treated) and also, like the schoolboy, he works best and hardest with a firm controlling hand. No punishment, however severe, is ever resented if thoroughly deserved<sup>120</sup>

These sorts of depictions of the Gurkhas implied that they were unintelligent, lacked initiative, and would be lost without their British officers. While the news stories of today might not reference the martial race theory or compare the Gurkhas to public schoolboys, the essential descriptions of the Gurkhas has not changed much in the last 200 years. The news stories on Tuljung Gurung quoted in the introduction to this paper are a good example. These stories stress his toughness, bravery, and concern for fellow soldiers to the exclusion of all else. This is lamentable because it does not give the Gurkhas credit for some of their greatest strengths. Throughout their 200-year history, the Gurkhas have consistently demonstrated intrepidity, tact, and intelligence, not merely simple bravery and blind obedience to their British officers. In Kosovo the Gurkhas managed to keep the peace against Serbian provocations without resorting to force. In Malaysia the Gurkhas won the hearts and minds of the villages they came across, allowing them to defeat first a local insurgency, then an attack by the Indonesians. In peacekeeping operations in East Timor, Bosnia, and Sierra Leon the Gurkhas have negotiated post conflict states where civilians and combatants are intermixed and a single mistake could have led to a renewal of violence. And in their beginning, prior to being incorporated into the Indian Army as regular infantry, the first Gurkha battalions made do with only three officers per unit, far fewer than in any Sepoy or British battalion. In these battalions Gurkha officers commanded Gurkha companies and the British officers were mainly there in an administrative capacity.<sup>121</sup> These are not examples of a force that is simply brave or loyal, but intelligent and adaptable as well.

This disparity between the simplistic manner in which the Gurkhas have largely been portrayed and their full range of talents is crucial, not just because of the insult it does their history, but because of the impact it could have on their future. In the modern era of asymmetric warfare and

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<sup>119</sup> Caplan: 1999, 591.

<sup>120</sup> Woodyatt: 1922, 177, quoted in Caplan: 1999, 592.

<sup>121</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 64.

blurred lines between combatants and noncombatants the last thing the British army needs is a Brigade of blindly loyal and courageous soldiers. What it does need is a Brigade of men who are brave, loyal, *and* are able to think for themselves, gain the trust of locals, and act in a decisive manner when needed. This is something the Gurkhas have historically excelled at, but their pigeonholing into being simply brave and loyal has obscured this. A unit famous for its courage and loyalty might be enough to attract a seemingly endless stream of recruits from Nepal, but it might not be enough to insure that unit's continued existence in the face of increasing costs and a changing world.

### **The Struggle for Equal Rights**

Despite the enthusiasm to join the Gurkhas all of the young men I talked to expressed, and despite the unit's almost uniformly positive literary portrayal, there is a darker side to Gurkhas' 200-year history. Conditions of service for the Gurkhas have never been the same as for British soldiers, and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century this resulted in an explosion of Gurkha rights movements. Gurkha veterans are currently protesting outside the British embassy in Kathmandu, another veteran has just ended a two-week hunger strike outside Number 10 Downing Street at the time of this writing, and as a result the British government is currently conducting an inquiry into the Gurkha's conditions of service.<sup>122</sup>

These conditions of service have evolved ever since the Gurkhas were first formed, and over the years have steadily inched towards parity with British soldiers. When they first began life as irregular infantry in the service of the East India Company, the Gurkhas were not paid as much as the Sepoys serving in the Indian Army's Regiments of the Line. After the Gurkhas became regular regiments in 1850 their pay was increased to that received by Indian Sepoys, though this was still substantially lower than that received by British soldiers.<sup>123</sup> The next leap forward for Gurkha rights came after the 1947 Tripartite Agreement between Britain, India, and Nepal. The relevant portion of this agreement reads:

In all matters of promotion, welfare, and other facilities the Gurkha troops should be treated on the same footing as the other units in the parent army so that the stigma of 'mercenary' may for all time be wiped out.<sup>124</sup>

This would seem to indicate that British Gurkhas would henceforth receive pay and pensions equal to British soldiers of equal rank, but until the last decade this was not the case. Instead British Gurkhas' received rates of pay and pensions approximately equal to *Indian* soldiers of equal rank.<sup>125</sup> This did not cause many problems prior to the British departure from Hong Kong in 1997. Subsequently, however, the majority of Gurkhas were based in the United Kingdom, where their salaries were no longer sufficient to cover their living expenses. The British government took several decades to respond, and Major Krishna (retired) recalls that during his service with the Queen's Gurkha Signals in Britain from the 1970s through the 90s, he was paid

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<sup>122</sup> BBC News: November 21<sup>st</sup> 2013.

<sup>123</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 81.

<sup>124</sup> *Tripartite Agreement*, 7, cited in Bellamy: 2011, 266.

<sup>125</sup> Parker: 1999, 323.

less than British soldiers of equal rank and lived in barracks without air-conditioning, while British soldiers lived in barracks with it.<sup>126</sup>

It was not until 2007 that Gurkha pay and conditions of service were finally brought in line with British soldiers of equal rank.<sup>127</sup> One year later retired Gurkhas who had served more than four years since 1947 were given the right to settle in the United Kingdom after a long public campaign led by British actress Joanna Lumley, daughter of a former Gurkha.<sup>128</sup> Ironically this has forced ex-Gurkhas to make a difficult decision. Currently serving Gurkhas now receive pensions that are mostly equivalent to British soldiers, but this does not apply to Gurkhas who retired before 1997. They still receive a pension approximately one third of what a British soldier of equal rank receives.<sup>129</sup> This is justified by the cost of living differences between Britain and Nepal, but with ever-greater numbers of ex-Gurkhas making the costly move to Britain this distinction is no longer acceptable to many veterans. They can elect to remain in Nepal, where their pensions will go further, but in most cases they will be without access to healthcare, jobs, clean water, or electricity, or they can move to Britain where they will have access to all of these things and their children can get a western education, but where they might not be able to pay their rent. The story of Lieutenant Lalbahadur Gurung is an example of the problems these veterans faced when returning to Nepal.

Perhaps one son may return to farming, but there is no land available for the others. It is difficult to make that adjustment now, in this modern age. From the 1966 neon city of Hong Kong, I and many like me were to be literally dumped back in our villages, where life has not changed much in decades. The simple things of life that we and my family had now become used to – like turning on the tap for clear drinkable water, like switching on the electric light, watching television, reading a newspaper every morning – would be banished from the lives of those who returned to the hills. And instead of riding on buses, on trains and in taxicabs, they would have to walk between villages, just as we always had, and perhaps two or three miles [three or four kilometers] to the nearest good water tap... The pensions that we Gurkhas receive in comparison to similar ranks in the rest of the British army are pitifully low. It is explained away by the lower cost of living in Nepal... these days, it is not a sound argument.<sup>130</sup>

Lieutenant Lalbahadur Gurung was actually more fortunate than many of his colleagues. Since he had already served for 21 years he was eligible for a pension, and as a lieutenant at the time of his forced retirement it was much higher than that of a mere rifleman.

By comparison, many of the Gurkhas dismissed during the massive reductions of strength that occurred in the late 1940s following the end of the Second World War, and again in 1997 after the British withdrawal from Hong Kong had not served the minimum 15 years of service and

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<sup>126</sup> From my November 8<sup>th</sup> interview with Major Krishna (retired).

<sup>127</sup> From my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

<sup>128</sup> Bell: October 1<sup>st</sup> 2008.

<sup>129</sup> The Guardian: January 11<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>130</sup> Lieutenant Lalbahadur Gurung (retired), quoted in Parker: 1999, 311-312.

received no pensions.<sup>131</sup> Most returned to the villages they grew up in, and returned to a life of substance farming.

There are private charities dedicated to helping these ex-servicemen who do not qualify for pensions. One of these charities is the Gurkha Welfare Scheme, which was founded in 1969 and is primarily funded by the Gurkha Welfare Trust; a UK based charity that raises money from private individuals and organization. The Gurkha Welfare Scheme operates nineteen area welfare centers across Nepal, one in India, and two residential homes in Nepal. It distributes a welfare pension of 5,800 Nepalese Rupees a month (58 US dollars at a 2013 exchange rate) to veterans and their dependents who receive no pension. It also currently houses 15 ex-Gurkhas and dependents on a fulltime basis who are in extreme hardship.<sup>132</sup>

All of the veterans and dependents I talked to at the Pokhara residential home seemed content enough to be living there. Padam K Sunuwar is one example. Her husband was Bhakta B Sunuwar, the wounded Gurkha carried out of the Burmese jungle by his comrades referenced on page 22. After he was forced to retire without a pension or disability insurance he returned to his village and married Padam Sunuwar. He then attempted to rejoin the Gurkhas in India after the war ended, but was rejected. Bhakta Sunuwar passed away in 2005, and Padam Sunuwar now lives in the Pokhara home, and told me that she was happy to be living in the home, and considers it a reward for her husband's service.<sup>133</sup> Not all Gurkha veterans are as happy with the assistance they have received.

There are numerous ex-servicemen's organizations that have appeared in the past three decades in the push for Gurkha rights. These organizations have had numerous successes, among them gaining the right to settle in the UK for former Gurkhas and their families (which currently only includes wives and children under 18) and getting current soldiers pensions and pay in line with British soldiers. Many of them are still embroiled in an ongoing fight over the pensions of veterans who retired before 1997, however. One of these organizations is the British Gurkha Struggle Committee, which is protesting outside the British embassy in Kathmandu at the time of this writing. Their grievances are:

- 1) For all Gurkha veterans to receive pensions equal in value to British soldiers of equal rank.
- 2) For all dependents of Gurkha veterans over the age of 18 to be allowed to settle in the UK.
- 3) Compensation for overseas service for all current soldiers (which all British soldiers who are deployed overseas receive).
- 4) Pensions for those made redundant in the post-World War Two and post-Hong Kong reductions.

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<sup>131</sup> The Gurkha Welfare Trust.

<sup>132</sup> From my November 8<sup>th</sup> interview with Major Krishna (retired) and November 13<sup>th</sup> interview with Captain Sumi P Tamang (retired), both of whom work at the Pokhara residential home.

<sup>133</sup> From my November 13<sup>th</sup> interview with Padam K Sunuwar at the GWS Pokhara residential home, translated by Mr. Purna B Rana, a staff member at the home.

5) Medical facilities in Nepal for injured and elderly veterans.<sup>134</sup>

The British Gurkha Struggle Committee's presence outside the British embassy in Kathmandu took place in support of a mass protest by veterans in the UK and a two-week hunger strike by Gurkha veteran Gyan Raj Rai outside the British Prime Minister's residence at Number 10 Downing Street. This hunger strike ended on November 21<sup>st</sup> 2013 after Prime Minister David Cameron gave his "blessing" to a parliamentary probe into all aspects of the Gurkhas' grievances.<sup>135</sup>

Though a victory for the Gurkha veterans groups, this protest and review may have a negative impact on the Gurkha's long-term viability. One of the key appeals of the Gurkhas to the British has always been that they are cheaper to maintain and recruit than a British unit of equal strength. With the steady progression towards equal pay and pensions for Gurkhas over the last three decades, this difference in cost is diminishing at the same time the British government is attempting to reduce its annual military budget. Currently the British government provides seven million pounds annually to 23,000 pensioners in Nepal.<sup>136</sup> In addition the Gurkha Welfare Trust provides almost thirteen million pound annually in private funds, mostly in support of the Gurkha Welfare Scheme's projects.<sup>137</sup> The government's costs will inevitably go up if the current review of ex- Gurkha's pensions leads to an increase, and as beneficial as this would be to thousands of veterans across the UK and Nepal, this could spell disaster for the future of the Brigade of Gurkhas.

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<sup>134</sup> From an interview on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 with Rajen Raj Rai, secretary of the British Gurkha Struggle Committee, protesting outside the British embassy in Kathmandu.

<sup>135</sup> BBC News: November 21<sup>st</sup> 2013.

<sup>136</sup> From my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

<sup>137</sup> The Gurkha Welfare Trust.

## *The Future of the Gurkhas*

The first people to go will be the Brigade of Gurkhas, probably in their entirety. In the past the Gurkhas' existence was guaranteed by the fact that they are cheaper to run than British troops, and that there was a shortage of British troops. Recent changes mean they are now just as expensive, and recruitment is extremely healthy at the moment. I am afraid the writing is on the wall.<sup>138</sup>

Patrick Mercer, British MP, August 29<sup>th</sup> 2010

Operationally they perform outstandingly. They represent value for money... The Gurkhas have a long-term future.<sup>139</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Elton Davis, Chief of Staff British Gurkha Nepal, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013



Figure 4

<sup>138</sup> Patrick Mercer speaking to *The Observer*: August 29<sup>th</sup> 2010, quoted in Bellamy: 2011, 327.

<sup>139</sup> From my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.

## The Current Outlook

That the Gurkhas have survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is astounding, a product of their operational record and the high regard the British public holds them in, but whether or not this combat record will be enough to ensure they continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is another matter. The British military is downsizing, the costs of running the Brigade of Gurkhas is increasing, and the British government has become increasingly unwilling to intervene militarily around the world. In other words at the exact time the demand for their services is at its lowest, the costs of the Brigade of Gurkhas are at their highest. The Gurkhas were created as a result of the British Empire, and the overwhelming majority of their deployments have been either to expand or defend that empire. Now that the empire is gone, the argument is being made that the Gurkhas have outlived their usefulness.

The British politicians who control the future of the Gurkhas have grown tired of the costs associated with them, not just monetary, but politically as well. The British government has suffered three decades of domestic and international disapproval over its handling of the Gurkha rights movement, and the very existence of the Brigade of Gurkhas gives ammunition to those who accuse modern Britain as being an imperial power. Only the Gurkhas' popularity with the British public, the British army's recruitment woes, and the willingness of the Sultan of Brunei to pay for a battalion of the Royal Gurkha Rifles to be garrisoned in Brunei, have saved them so far. These three factors have allowed the Gurkhas to continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but they will not be enough to ensure that the Brigade sees the end of it.

It is a cruel irony that the Gurkhas have become victims of their own success. The reputation the Gurkhas have built up as being fiercely courageous in battle and loyal to the Crown are no longer as valuable as they once were. Even worse, they have hindered the recognition of some of the Gurkhas most impressive traits that are more applicable to the modern world. The Gurkhas' 200 years of experience in counter-insurgency warfare gained in Afghanistan, Burma, Malaysia, and Brunei has largely been forgotten, compared to their much larger participation in the two World Wars. Britain is unlikely to fight another world war anytime soon, and this has been the rationale behind many of the current reductions to the British military budget. But no matter how much Britain attempts to avoid it, the country will most likely become embroiled in another conflict like Afghanistan today, where the Gurkhas less publicized skills will be useful.

The Brigade of Gurkhas maintains other key advantages as well. Although the evolving push for equal rights by the veterans has made the Gurkhas more expensive, it would be a mistake to say that the Gurkhas cost as much as a British unit of equal size. When a British soldier joins the army he has a thirty to forty percent chance of dropping out during his basic training. Providing he completes it, he will generally only serve for three or four years, after which time he will retire from the army and collect a pension. Gurkhas have an almost zero drop out rate during their much longer training period, and once they join, they serve for a minimum of fifteen years, and most stay for the maximum twenty-two.<sup>140</sup> This saves a tremendous amount of money, since during training a soldier is unable to be deployed but is still paid, so a twenty-two year turnover is obviously preferable to a four-year turnover.

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<sup>140</sup> From my October 23<sup>rd</sup> interview with Lieutenant Colonel Davis.



Furthermore, because the competition for the Brigade of Gurkhas is so fierce within Nepal, the overall caliber of Gurkhas has grown tremendously over the previous few decades. The successful Gurkha recruits are on average fitter, better educated, and better disciplined than ever before. In effect the elite status of the Brigade of Gurkhas has become self-fulfilling, insuring that only the best past selection and enter the Brigade's ranks. No British Regiments (with the exception of a few elite units, such as the paratroopers) have the caliber of recruit created by this process.

A final key advantage of the Brigade of Gurkhas is their ability to act as a strategic manpower reserve when need. This is a role they are currently fulfilling, making up the numbers for British Battalions that cannot fill their recruitment quotas. With Britain's economy currently growing, fewer and fewer young men are electing to join the army. This situation could always reverse in the short term (as it already has several times in the previous two decades), but in the long term, in Britain there is a clear trend away from military service among the younger population. With this in mind, having a unit that does not show any indications of experiencing recruitment problems seems an obvious safety measure to insure the British army remains at its desired level. Additionally, if Britain ever is involved in a major land war again, the Gurkhas could become essential, providing the same massive manpower boosts that they did in both World Wars.

Ironically the objections from Nepalese politicians to the Gurkhas' existence have largely subsided, and by and large they have realized that the concrete economic contribution of the Gurkhas outweighs their perceived insults to national independence. If the Gurkhas do cease to exist it will be as a result of the British government and ministry of defense, not the Nepalese.

## **Conclusion**

The Gurkhas were formed in a bloody conflict between the massive British Empire and the kingdom of Nepal. They grew from a small band of irregulars in the service of the East India Company in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to a peak strength of over 112,000 men serving during the Second World.<sup>141</sup> In between, the Gurkhas fought against the Burmese, the Afghans, and the Sikhs, where they proved their ability to fight against insurgencies; and against the Indian Sepoys, where they demonstrated their loyalty to the Crown. After the independence of India the Gurkhas continued to fight for the British Empire in Malaysia, Brunei, Hong Kong, East Timor, Kosovo, the Falklands, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leon.

They have survived 200 years of combat, downsizing after both World Wars, partition after the Independence of India, and decimation after the handover of Hong Kong. They have fought and won almost every battle they have been involved in, and continue to fight for the British today in Afghanistan. Time and time again they have sacrificed themselves for a country that they seemingly owe nothing to.

But the interactions between the Gurkhas and the British have always gone both ways. Selection to the Gurkhas is the dream of thousands of Nepalese young men because they know it means security for life. They can leave their villages where there is often no safe water for kilometers, not electricity, and no jobs, for Britain. There they can have a steady job for twenty-two years, a

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<sup>141</sup> Bellamy: 2011, 264.

pension, and the right to settle permanently in the UK when they retire. They can learn a trade, explore the world, and take pride in being a part of one of the world's most famous military units.

The Gurkhas are what first made Nepal famous. Before Mount Everest was climbed, before air travel made tourism in Nepal accessible to outsiders, before more than a handful of Europeans had ever been to Nepal, the country was known across the world for the caliber of soldiers it produced.

It is a tragedy that all the hopes and dreams of thousands of Nepalese men, and all the military benefits that the Gurkhas provide Britain, could be crushed by a handful of British politicians. The Gurkhas provide economic security to the Nepalese and strategic security to the British, but whether this will be enough to offset their economic and political costs is up in the air. It seems clear that the Gurkhas have earned a place in the British Army, not only because of their history, but also because of their very real current contributions to British national security.

For what it's worth, I believe that the Gurkhas will continue to serve in the British Army, at least in the next half-century or so. Whether this will be because of the British public's affinity for the Gurkhas or because of the tactical and strategic advantages they provide the British Army is impossible to predict. What seems assured by their 200-year history and current recruitment standards is that the Gurkhas will continue to serve with bravery *and intelligence* in whatever conflict they are next sent into, providing the British Government gives them the opportunity.

*Appendix A: India Prior to the Anglo-Nepalese War*

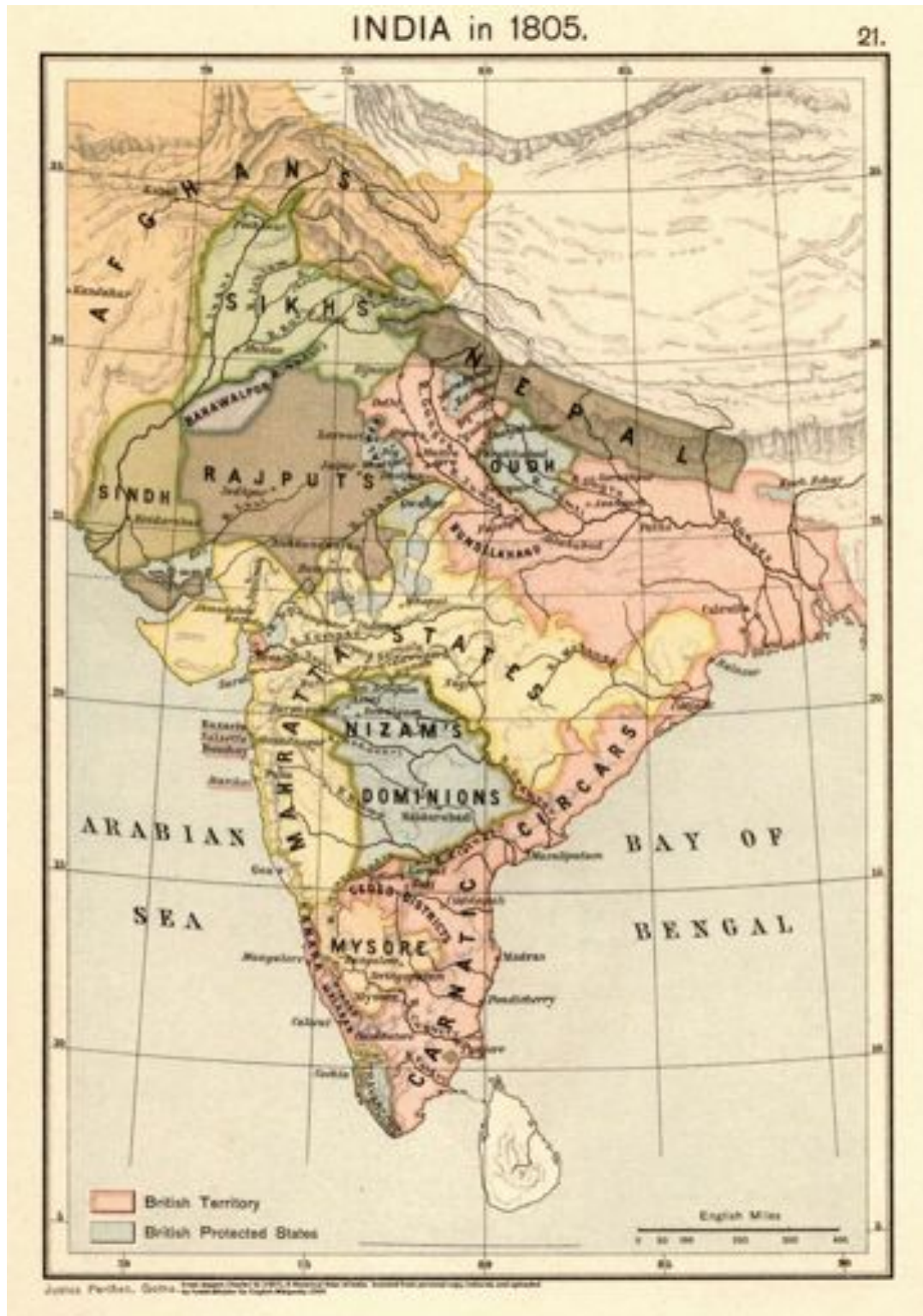


Figure 5



A commonly held myth about the Khukuri is that it cannot be returned to the scabbard after being drawn without first drawing blood. This is not true, though due to the khukuri's lengthy history and symbolic importance it is considered bad form to draw it without intending to use it.

**Musket (early 16<sup>th</sup> century to late 19<sup>th</sup> century):** The standard weapon for all European infantry units from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century until replaced by rifles in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The musket is a smoothbore muzzle-loading weapon fired from the shoulder. Early on the musket went through several firing mechanisms changes, but by the time the Gurkhas were first given them in 1815 the flintlock system had become standard. When the trigger was pulled it would cause the lock (a pair of steel jaws holding a piece of flint) to fall into the breach (a small pan holding black powder. This would ignite the powder, causing a small flame to travel into the barrel, where it would ignite the main charge. This would propel a lead ball out of the barrel.

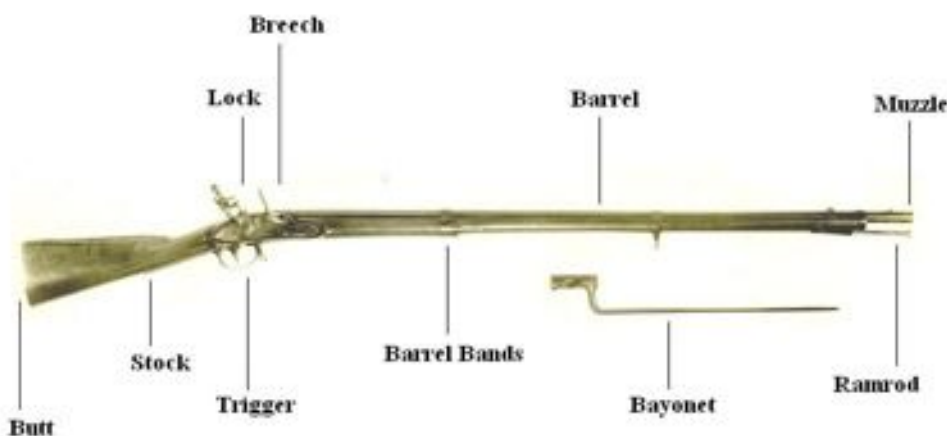


Figure 7

To reload the lock would be pulled to “half-cock” position that ensured the gun would not fire prematurely. Then a soldier would tear a premeasured paper cartridge of black powder open and pour most down the muzzle. Next the soldier would drop the bullet into the muzzle and use the ramrod to push it into position. Finally he would dribble the remaining powder into the breach and pull the lock to full-cock. The whole process would take anywhere from 15 seconds to a minute, depending on how well trained the soldier was.

A musket had the advantage of being easy to produce and use, but was horribly inaccurate and almost useless in the rain. To counter its inaccuracy muskets would often be employed en-mass, and tactics from its time required opposing regiments to trade massed volleys in ranks of three (or in the British army, two) at close range until one side either broke or mounted a bayonet charge (a long knife-like weapon that could be attached to the end of a musket or rifle effectively turning it into a spear), at which point the fight would be decided in hand-to-hand combat.

**Rifle (early 19<sup>th</sup> century to present day):** The key distinction between a rifle and a musket is that a rifle barrel is grooved (known as rifled). This imparts a spin on the bullet as it travels through the barrel making it much more accurate (the same principle applies to Rugby and

American football passes). The rifle has gone through three key iterations through history: muzzle-loading rifles (17<sup>th</sup> century to late 19<sup>th</sup> century), breach-loading rifles (mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century), and assault rifles (mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day).

Muzzle-loading rifles have been around almost as long as muskets, but were not commonly employed in warfare until the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Their only difference from muskets is their rifled barrels, and though much more accurate they also took much longer to load. This made them useless in the line of battle, but during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815) elite rifle units (such as the British Green Jackets) were used as skirmishers, charged with engaging the enemy main line of battle and targeting enemy officers while staying out of the musket's range. In 1858 the Gurkha Sirmoor Battalion was armed with these type rifles and given the title of the 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles in recognition for their service during the Indian Mutiny. Soon after, however, the industrial revolution created a new type of rifle that became universal.

Breech-loading rifles were first used in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had replaced muskets entirely as the standard infantry weapon of all European armies. The breech-loading rifle was loaded from the rear, not the front, of the barrel. This eliminated the trouble with forcing a bullet down the rifle barrel and allowed for a much greater rate of fire. This innovation also allowed the rifle to be fired and reloaded from a prone (laying down) position, and led to the end of the dominant Regiment of the Line tactics of the 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the widespread adaptation of "small-unit" tactics, where companies, platoons, or even sections (see glossary) would fight each other in isolated firefights. From the 1890s to the late 1940s the standard rifle for all British infantry was a variation of the Lee-Enfield, a bolt-action magazine fed rifle (bolt-action refers to the method of reloading a round, magazine fed means ammunition was loaded into a metal chamber at the base of the rifle).



Figure 8

British Gurkhas attacking the Japanese in WWII. The forward three Gurkhas are all armed with Lee-Enfields. Note the magazine visible in front of the trigger on the rifle of the soldier second from the rear.

The most modern iteration of the rifle is the assault rifle. The Germans were the first to develop assault rifles during the Second World War after they realized that most infantry engagements

were conducted within 400 meters. At this range the heavy caliber rifles (i.e. rifles that fired large bullets) are not ideal for this close-range warfare. The German response was to create a rifle that fired a much lighter round at high velocity, automatically (that is, a rifle that continually fired while the trigger is depressed. See the section on machine guns for a description on how this system operates). Key characteristics of assault rifles are that they use disposable magazines that are quick to reload and can fire in single shots, bursts, or fully automatically, depending on the situation. Assault rifles were universally adopted in the 1950s, and the current British general-purpose assault rifle is the Enfield L85 Rifle.

### **Hand Grenade (~750 AD to present day):**

Hand grenades have existed since the Byzantine Empire first used them around 750 AD, but in their modern form they have been in use for just over a century. They have evolved from clay pots filled with Greek Fire (an incendiary that would ignite on contact with air) to crude metal cases filled with gunpowder ignited via fuse to modern fragmentation grenades made from steel. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century European armies flirted with the use of the second type of grenade, leading to the creation of elite grenadier companies, but the actual use of grenades was never widespread due to their unreliability. This changed just before World War One, when modern grenades made from steel or cast iron that would fragment into lethal projectiles and equipped with much more reliable ignition systems came into widespread service. These grenades were widely used in both World Wars to destroy infantry in cover in building or trenches, and the Indian Army's lack of them at the beginning of the First World War had a serious impact on their effectiveness.

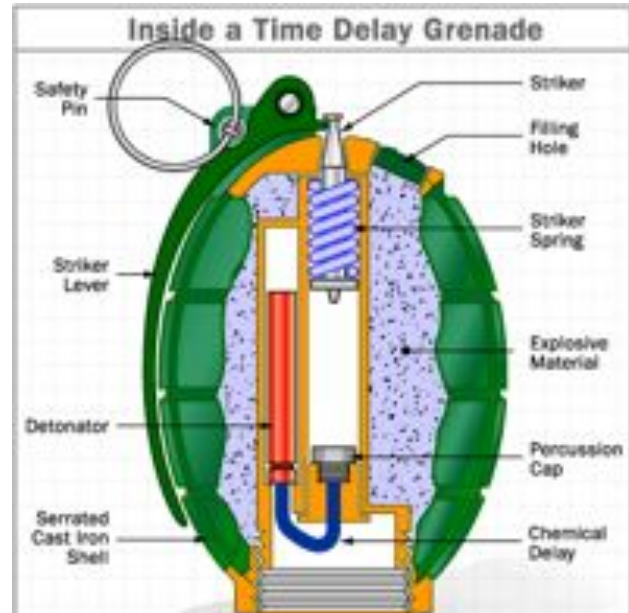


Figure 9

**Machine Gun (mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to present day):** A machine gun is an infantry weapon designed for sustained automatic fire. They were first used in the American Civil War in the 1860s, but they did not see widespread combat operations until the First World War. The fundamental principle is to use either the escaping gas or physical recoil of the weapon being fired to eject the spent cartridge and load the next (this same operation also applies to assault rifles, the primary difference being the size of bullet used and weapon weight). This allows a machine gun to be fired continuously as long as the trigger is depressed and there is ammunition available. The combination of machine guns and barbed wire in World War One turned any attack into a bloodbath and resulted in stalemate on the western front and widespread trench warfare. It took the advent of tanks and effective airpower to finally break the battlefield supremacy of the machine gun.

One problem that affects all machine guns is that continuous fire rapidly heats the gun barrel, which will eventually warp or burst if not cooled from time to time. Near the end of World War

One this led to the separation of machine guns into machine guns with some sort of coolant system built in and those that did not. The machine guns that do not have a coolant system are more portable, but incapable of sustained fire, and are known as light machine guns. Since World War Two all British rifle sections have at least one light machine gunner. Many modern assault rifles can be configured as light machine guns, and the distinction between the two has become blurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Figure 10

Machine guns with a coolant system are less portable, but capable of longer periods of sustained fire, and are known as medium and heavy machine guns, depending on caliber.



Figure 11



**Mortar (17<sup>th</sup> century to present day):** The mortar is an artillery piece that fires some form of projectile at low velocity and a high ballistic trajectory. The original intension was to fire an explosive shell over a fortress wall during a siege to lower defender's moral and cause casualties among them. Mortars have been used since the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, but were not commonly used until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These types of mortars were massive contraptions that could only be transported with great difficulty, and were rarely used in field battles (battles in the open between forces, as supposed to siege battles, where one side would shelter in a fortified town or fort).

This changed in 1915 with the invention of trench mortars that could be transported and operated by one to three soldiers. These mortars relied on shells that contained their own propellant, and consisted of a simple tube and bipod. They were extremely useful in the First World War because they could drop an explosive charge into the enemy's trench without exposing the operator to return fire. By the end of the First World War every infantry battalion had a mortar section, and this continues to the present day.

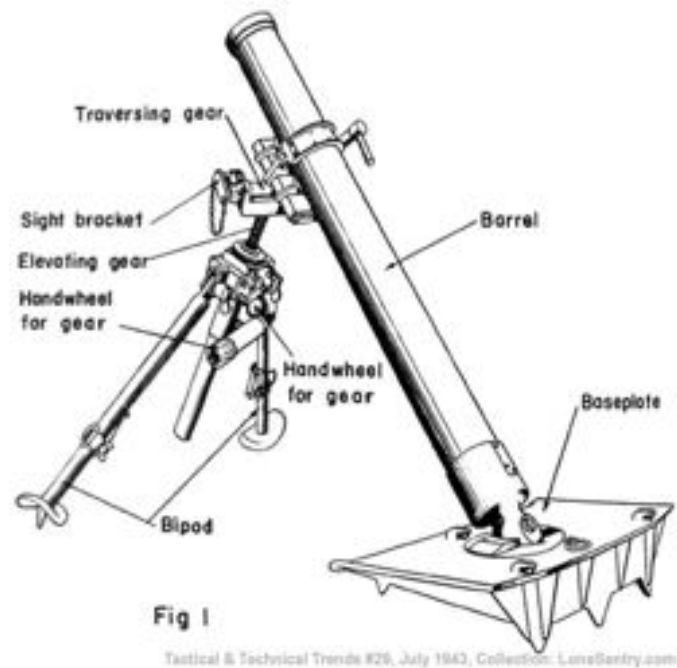


Figure 12

*Appendix C: Breakdown of Gurkha Recruits by Ethnic Group 2009-2010\**

<i>Ethnic Group</i>	<i>Registered (%)</i>	<i>Passed Regional Selection (%)</i>	<i>Passed Central Selection (%)</i>
Brahman	1.63	0	0
Chhetri	7.19	4.80	3.41
Gurung	17.96	22.00	22.16
Limbu	14.44	14.80	18.75
Magar	21.29	20.80	23.30
Rai	19.20	18.20	15.91
Tamang	5.91	9.20	6.82
Thakuri	1.74	2.00	2.27
Others	10.64	8.20	7.38
Total	100	100	100

\* All data from statistics on display on the noticeboards at Gurkha recruitment centers in Dharan and Pokhara as recorded by Chris Bellamy in June of 2010 and presented in his 2011 book, *The Gurkhas: Special Force*.

## *Appendix D: Sample Questions from Gurkha Regional Selection English and Math Tests\**

### **English:**

*Put in the correct order T(%), E (#), A(?), C(>), H (<), R(/), then write RATE.*

- a) %#?>
- b) /<#>?
- c) >?%<
- d) /?%#

*P and S wear white shirts. Rest of them wear black and R and S like to play games. Rest don't like to play games. S and Q read with male teachers but rest of others read with female teachers. Who is the person who reads with the female teacher and doesn't like to play games?*

- a) S
- b) P
- c) R
- d) Q

*Currently the Brigade of Gurkhas is deployed in...*

- a) Afghanistan
- b) Brunei
- c) Iraq
- d) Bosnia

*He died \_\_\_\_\_an illness.*

- a) from
- b) of
- c) by
- d) with

### **Math:**

*Simplify the following:  $\cot 45 * \cos 60 * \sin 30$*

*A regiment has a total of 458 people. 60% of the people are Gurung, 25% are Magar, and 15% are Rai. 86 more Gurung join the regiment. What percentage of the regiment's people is Gurung now?*

*A rectangular garden is 4 meters longer than its breath. Find the breath of the garden if its area is  $357^2$ ?*

*\* From Rahul Pandey's 2013 So You Want to be a Gurkha: British Gurkha Army Recruitment Text Book.*

## *Glossary*

**Asymmetric Warfare:** Any warfare in which one side has a major technological or numerical advantage over the other. This generally results in low level insurgencies and near-constant ambushes, reprisals, and small unit firefights.

**Battalion:** In the British military the battalion is the army's primary tactical infantry unit. A modern rifle battalion is comprised of several rifle companies and a heavy weapons company. Generally comprised of 600 to a thousand men and commanded by a major.

**Brigade:** A military unit comprised of several battalions, along with supporting arms. The Brigade is the smallest military unit typically capable of sustaining independent action, and generally around 5,000 strong.

**Brigade of Gurkhas:** The post-partition organization of the British Gurkhas. Currently comprised of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, the Queen's Gurkha Engineers, the Queen's Own Logistic Regiment, and the Queen's Gurkha Signals.

**British Army in India:** The British regular regiments that served in India alongside the Indian Army.

**Company:** A subdivision of a battalion, generally commanded by a captain and approximately 100 strong. During the Napoleonic era companies were only used to denote camp chores (with the exception of grenadier and light infantry companies). After the industrial revolution and the increasingly lethal battlefield that resulted, companies took on much greater importance, as battalions were often unable to maneuver en mass without suffering horrendous casualties.

**Corps:** Can refer to either a military unit comprised of several divisions or a specialized component of armed forces such as the Corps of Engineers.

**Division:** A military unit comprised of several brigades, capable of sustained autonomous deployment. A modern infantry division generally consists of several rifle brigades and supporting artillery, anti-air, transportation, and support personnel. A Division is generally around 10,000 strong, and commanded by a Major General.

**French Foreign Legion:** The only large-scale modern example of foreigners serving in a western military other than the Gurkhas. The French Foreign Legion was formed in 1831 and is open to men from any nationality. Applicants are required to learn French and undergo difficult physical and mental training. Widely regarded as one of France's elite forces.

**Grenadier:** Originally men specially recruited to use gunpowder type grenades during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. After these proved too unreliable for combat, the grenadiers discarded them but retained the name. Each battalion would have one grenadier company comprised of its largest and bravest men, and they would be at the forefront of any assault.

**Gurkha, Gorkha, Goorkha:** See the origins of the Gurkhas on page 4.

**Indian Army:** In this context this refers to the British controlled and officered Sepoy army in India. This included the Gurkhas, and was widely looked down upon by the British Army in India.

**Infantry:** Traditionally soldiers who fight on foot, though today they may fight from armored personnel carriers or transport helicopters. The infantry's job is to close with and destroy the enemy and hold important positions.

**Irregulars:** Any fighting force not part of a regular army. In the context of East India Company controlled India this referred to native infantry that were not part of English controlled regiments of the line. In more modern usage it is often used to militias, insurgents, and other forces that do not fight as part of a national army.

**Light Infantry:** Light infantry were skirmishers during the Napoleonic era, charged with screening the movements of a force and engaging the enemy lines at long range. Each battalion would traditionally have one light company.

**Picket:** Also Picquet or piquet. In general terms to post a thin line of infantry in front of an army camp or defensive position to give warning of an enemy attack. In reference to mountain fighting it means to occupy the high ground to allow the passage of friendly column below.

**Platoon:** The subunit of a company, usually around 40 strong and typically commanded by a lieutenant or sergeant.

**Royal Air Force (RAF):** The British Air force, formed April 1<sup>st</sup> 1918. The RAF became famous after it's heroic defiance of the much larger German air force during the aerial Battle of Britain.

**Regiment:** If the battalion is the unit within which a soldier will be deployed, the Regiment is his "home". It is his primary source of identity, and can contain as many as ten or as few as one battalion. Regiments each have their own battle flag displaying their campaign honors and regimental histories.

**Regiment of the line:** In common use from the late 17<sup>th</sup> through mid 19<sup>th</sup> centuries this was the primary component of a European army. The name refers to how soldiers of the line would fight in two opposing lines either three (continental) or two (British) deep, which would trade volleys of musket fire and then close to fight with the bayonet.

**Rifleman:** The lowest rank of a rifle unit.

**Rifles:** Originally referred to elite units armed with rifles. After rifles became universal the title was maintained as a symbol of elite status.

**Special Air Service (SAS):** Britain's most famous Special Forces unit. Officially formed on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1947, the SAS had its origins as a commando unit in the Second World War. Since

that it has been deployed in Borneo and Malaya, and its most famous action was the 1980 Iranian Embassy siege. Widely regarded as one of the world's most professional Special Forces Units.

**Section:** Commanded by a sergeant, and the equivalent of an American squad. The section is the smallest unit within the British army, typically comprised of 6 to 12 men.

**Sepoy:** Indian soldiers in the service of the British Empire. They served in the Indian Army until India's independence in 1947.

**Victorian Cross:** The supreme award for gallantry in the British army, instituted in 1856, backdated to 1854. Gurkhas were eligible for the medal from 1911 onwards.

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## *Suggestions for Future Research*

In this piece I have only scratched the surface of the history and future of the Brigade of Gurkhas. A look into the Gurkha contingent of the Singapore Police, or the Indian Gorkhas could be fascinating studies. For anyone wanting to focus on the British Brigade of Gurkhas a full or regimental history could be interesting topics, or a study on the recruitment process, or the struggle for equal right by retired Gurkhas. There is also a vacuum of academic work on the experiences of families of Gurkhas, and this could be an intriguing direction to pursue as well.

For anyone interesting in looking into the Gurkhas, Chris Bellamy's *The Gurkhas: Special Force* is a must read. It is a fantastically detailed and well-researched overview of the history of the Gurkhas from their inception in the 1815 Anglo-Nepalese War to their service in Afghanistan.

John Cross has also written numerous books on the Gurkhas, though they can be difficult to obtain outside of the Gurkha Memorial Museum. This museum is located in Pokhara and is a good starting point for any study into the history of the Gurkhas. John Cross himself lives in Pokhara, and as an ex Gurkha officer and longtime resident of Nepal has some fascinating perspectives on the history and future of the Gurkhas.

Pokhara is a useful place for any research into the Gurkhas as it is the current center for Gurkha recruitment in the west of Nepal, as well as the home of the Gurkha Memorial Museum and a Gurkha Welfare Scheme residential home that houses Gurkha veterans. Pokhara is also the home to many of the castes traditionally recruited as Gurkhas, and has dozens of training academies that cater to young Nepalese men attempting to join the Gurkhas. It is, therefore, an essential stop for anyone studying the recruitment system of the modern Brigade of Gurkhas.



Figure 13