

## About the Gurkhas

The Gorkha story really goes back to the Mongol Invasion of Tibet in 1239, where some of the Mongols settled, and eventually moved down into the valleys surrounding Kathmandu. The next most influential migration was by the higher caste Rajputs, when they fled India during the Moghul (Persian name for Mongol) Invasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. It is from those Rajputs that Prithvi Narayan Shahs line came from, and in 1773, Nepal as we know it today emerged from Prithvi's Gorkha Kingdom.

It was not until the 1814-16 Anglo-Nepalese war that the Gorkhas became known to the west, when they came into conflict with British East India Company. The British under-estimated the fighting capability of the Gorkhas and were struggling to beat them. At the same time they were impressed by their bravery and fighting skills, especially in close combat with the kukri, and the British developed a quick and admiring respect for their Gorkha enemy.

Seeing the potential of the Nepalese as great fighting troops, in 1815 the British East India Company formed the 1<sup>st</sup> Nasiri Battalion. The battalion was formed from mainly the Gurung and Magar tribes, and this was the beginning of the famous British Gurkhas, (the English spelling for Gorkha).

Generally the Gurkhas are chosen from the Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Rais, Tamang, Sunwar, Thakurs and Chhetris tribes of Nepal. But throughout history they have used other tribes, and even people from other countries, such as Bhutan and Sikkim.

However, it wasn't until the Indian Mutiny in 1857, that the Gurkha and his Kukri was truly accepted by the British and began to gain a high reputation outside of Nepal and India. It was here that the famous bond between the Gurkha and British troops began. Exploits such as those by Colonel Bahadur Gambarsing (Chetri), showed the Gurkhas true worth. During the battle of Chanda, he single-handedly captured three small artillery pieces. The last artillery piece was desperately defended by the mutineers, and they counter attacked Gambarsing with Talwar sword and Bayonet. Gambarsing who was only armed with his Kukri, took them on, cutting down seven of the enemy. Defending the piece of artillery, he lost some of his fingers and almost had his left hand cut off. During this action he received 23 wounds in total, including some large cuts on his head from sword strikes, the scars of which remained with him for the rest of his life. He survived and was immediately promoted to Lieutenant, and his exploits even came to the attention of the British Government, with the then Prince of Wales who in 1875 presented him with a Claymore Sword in recognition of his bravery. (Gurkhas were not eligible for the Victoria Cross back then).

## British Gurkhas in 1890



In 1914-18 The Great War, the Gurkhas enhanced their formidable reputation in both the trenches of Europe and the Dardanelles. The 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles famously took the heights at Sari Bair, gaining a massive advantage over the Turks, only to be bombed off the position by the Royal Navy!!

The Nepalese Gurkhas (British Gurkha Officers had previously won the VC, but the Nepalese Gurkhas were only eligible from 1911) won their first Victoria Cross in WWI, with Rifleman Kulbir Thapa (1888-1956) of the 2nd Battalion of 3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles "for most conspicuous bravery during operations against the German trenches South of Manquisart.

"When himself wounded, on the 25th September 1915, he found a badly wounded soldier of the 2nd Leicester Regiment behind the first line German trench, and although urged by the British soldier to save himself, he remained with him all day and night. In the early morning of the 26th 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 day-light 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." (*London Gazette*, 18 November 1915).

Just before 1939 there were some 18,000 Gurkhas in the British run Indian Army, and with the advent of World War II, a further 105,000 Gurkhas were recruited, going on to serve with great distinction.

[Picture of WWII British Gurkha](#)



Other such exploits included those by Bhanbhagta Gurung VC of the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles.

Bhanbhagta Gurung with Naik Gian Sikh VC, 15<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment



Bhanbaghta was described by his company commander as 'a smiling, hard-swearing, gallant and indomitable peasant soldier, who in a battalion of very brave men was one of the bravest'.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1945 (aged 23) Bhanbaghta's section became held up in an exposed position by a sniper. Bhanbaghta stood up and engaged the Japanese sniper in a duel killing him, whereupon the platoon moved forward only to then become held up by machine gun nests and bunkers. Bhanbaghta charged the nearest Japanese post throwing a grenade killing two of the enemy, and bayoneting the third, he then turned his attention to two other foxholes, where with grenades, rifle and kukri he killed the defenders. On the Eastern tip of Snowdon there remained one highly effective machine gun bunker, which was holding up the advance. Once again Bhanbaghta attacked, throwing smoke grenades into the bunker, and cutting down the Japanese with his kukri as they tried to escape. A machine gun was still firing inside the bunker, whereupon Bhanbaghta went inside amongst the smoke, and with his kukri he cut down the remaining Japanese machine gunner. A group of Japanese counter-attacked to regain the fallen bunker, but Bhanbaghta now accompanied by a Bren gunner and rifleman met the attack head on, killing several of the Japanese, holding the position until the attack disintegrated (a total of 63 dead Japanese were found from where Bhanbaghta led his assaults).

This was an amazing feat of courage, and the above write up does him no real justice, as he practically captured Snowden by himself.

Captain Michael Allmand (aged 20 at the time of his Posthumous VC)



During the Mogaung Operations, in Burma 11th - 23rd June 1944, Captain Allmand was commanding the leading platoon of a Company of the 6th Gurkha Rifles in Burma, when the Battalion was ordered to attack the Pin Hmi Road Bridge. The enemy had already succeeded in holding up our advance at this point for twenty-four hours. The approach to the bridge was very narrow as the road was banked up and the low-lying land on either side was swampy and densely covered in jungle. The Japanese, who were dug in along the banks of the road and in the jungle with machine guns and small arms, were putting up the most desperate resistance.

As the platoon came within twenty yards of the bridge, the enemy opened heavy and accurate fire, inflicting severe casualties and forcing the men to seek cover. Captain Allmand, however, with the utmost gallantry charged on by himself, hurling grenades into the enemy gun positions and killing three Japanese himself with his kukri. Inspired by the splendid example of their platoon commander the surviving men followed him and captured their objective.

Two days later Captain Allmand, owing to casualties among the officers, took over command of the Company and dashing thirty yards ahead of it through long grass and marshy ground, swept by machine gun fire, personally killed a number of enemy machine gunners and successfully led his men onto the ridge of high ground that they had been ordered to seize.

Once again on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June in the final attack on the railway bridge at Mogaung, Captain Allmand, although suffering from trench-foot, which made it difficult for him to walk, moved forward alone through deep mud and shell-holes and charged a Japanese machine gun nest single-handed but he was mortally wounded and died shortly afterwards.

The superb gallantry, outstanding leadership and protracted heroism of this very brave officer were a wonderful example to the whole Battalion and in the highest traditions of his regiment.

The citation did not go on to say that largely because of Captain Allmand's bravery, Mogaung was captured. Michael Allmand is buried in the Taukkyan War Cemetery, Burma.

After WWII the Gurkhas were split up between Britain and India, and the British Army made it entirely voluntary for whether the Gurkhas wished to remain in the British Regiments that were allocated to us, which were the 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles), 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles, 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles, and the 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles. This particular period was badly handled by the then British Labour Government, and as a consequence, it is perhaps the worst period in relations between the Gurkhas and their British Officers, which has always been based on trust and respect, rather than normal Military subservience. As a consequence the British Gurkhas lost a lot of men to the Indian Gorkhas, rather un-nessarily.

This left the British Army rather depleted of Gurkhas when the Malayan Emergency occurred during 1948-1960. It wasn't long before they were up to strength again however, and showing their exceptional skills in the jungle. This was aided in the initial period by the fact that a lot of the Officers serving with them were veterans of Burma in WWII, including the likes of Freddie Shaw who fought at the famous battle of Pagoda Hill, in the deep penetration Chindit operations under Mike Calvert against the Japanese.

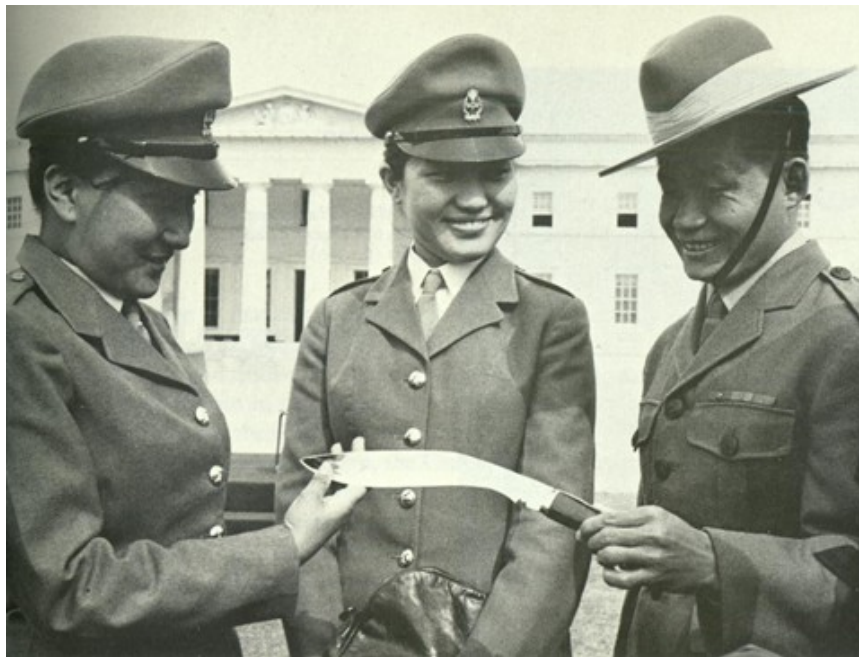
In Malaya the Gurkhas did sterling work, and often worked closely with the SAS (Malayan Scouts), reformed by Brigadier Mike Calvert, Britiains formost jungle warfare expert.

It was not long after the end of the Malayan Emergency that the Borneo Confrontation (1962-66) started, and once again the Gurkhas were to see plenty of action, doing long range penetration patrols in the Jungle, and once again working closely with likes of

the SAS. Indeed the Gurkha Independent Parachute Company was raised on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1963, as a regular Parachute company. Soon after its conception its role was converted from a conventional Parachute Company into an SAS type Company in June 1964. During the Borneo Confrontation, the Gurkhas won their most recent VC.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1965, Corporal Rambahadur Limbu of the 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles, showed outstanding bravery in attempting to rescue two of his badly wounded troop, whilst in the highly secret behind enemy lines 'Claret' Operations, which were not acknowledged for many years after the confrontation.

Rambahadur Limbu showing his British Service Issue kukri to some army Nurses.



In 1962 the Gurkhas faced their greatest threat, not from battle but from the then Labour Government. Labour were making plans to disband the British Gurkhas, when General Sir Walter Walker (1912-2001) got wind of what was happening. It is worth noting his military career first;

He went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, then briefly to the Sherwood Foresters, before joining the 1/8 Gurkhas in the mid-1930s (The 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles motto is 'Live Hard, Fight Hard, and when necessary Die Hard').

In Waziristan (1939-41), he was twice mentioned in dispatches; he also served in Burma, and, in 1944, proved a splendid Battalion Commander of the 4/8 Gurkhas, where he turned around the battered 4/8 GR, into one of the most formidable fighting units in Burma. Part of this process was very hard training and making them digest and act on creeds which reflected the bitter fighting with the Japanese, a selection of the creeds are below;

1. Destroy the enemy; do not allow him to retire
2. Move quickly, fight fiercely, and shoot low
3. The only good Jap is a dead one
4. Shoot to kill, kill to live

5. I prefer life to death, therefore I must never surrender

6. It should be the ambition of every man of the 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkha's to redden his kukri or bayonet in the enemies' blood.

In Malaya from 1949-59, during the emergency, Walker was twice mentioned in dispatches and commanded the 1/6 Gurkhas. In 1960 he was made Major-General of the Brigade of Gurkhas. Then in the Far East he was made Director of Operations in Borneo from 1962 to 1965, where he waged a highly effective defensive war against Indonesian incursion. He also received his CB and a second bar to his 1946 DSO. In 1965 and back in Europe, Walker became Deputy Chief-of-Staff of Allied Forces at the time when President de Gaulle was withdrawing French forces from NATO deployment. After a stint as General Officer commanding Northern Command, he came to his last military assignment, from 1969 to 1972, as Commander-in-Chief of Northern Europe.

It was during 1962, as Major-General of the Brigade of Gurkhas, that he got wind from people in Whitehall about the Government's plans. He immediately saw the King of Nepal, and also got a powerful ally in the British Embassy, Mr H E Stebbins, the British Ambassador for the USA, who considered the Gurkhas vital for operations in Asia. Mr Stebbins immediately put in a report to the US, who also considered the Gurkhas a vital part of the British Army, and as Major-General of the Brigade of Gurkhas, Walter Walker wrote a report.

By fighting for his Gurkhas to remain in the British Army, Walter had broken nearly every rule in the book, and he was summoned to CIGS (Chief of the Imperial General Staff, a pre-1964 position) Field-Marshal Sir Richard Hull. Luckily Walter Walker received some sound advice from Lieutenant General Sir William Pike, who advised him to apologise to Hull, (This was against Walter Walker's nature in this matter). However, he took Pike's advice and apologised to Hull, which was lucky, as if he hadn't, Hull was ready to sack him. Through Walter Walker's efforts, both the press and the public got wind of the Government's plans, and a public outcry caused the Labour Government to ditch their plans.

Since then the Gurkhas have served with great distinction with the British Army. During the Falklands War (1982), the 1/7<sup>th</sup> GR were preparing to attack Mount William but when the Argentines realised they were about to face the Gurkhas, they vacated their positions!!

The Gurkhas are the current Jungle specialists of the British Army, and are part of 2 Para. They have recently been engaged in operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Belize and Kosovo to name but a few.

The Gurkhas currently have two regiments in the British Army; The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of The Royal Gurkha Rifles was formed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1994 when the 6<sup>th</sup> Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward's VII Own Gurkhas (The Sirmoor Rifles) merged.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of The Royal Gurkha Rifles was formed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1994 when the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles merged.

There are currently about 3,500 Gurkha's serving in the British Army and each year, British Gurkhas are recruited from Nepal, with 28,000 youths tackling the selection procedure for just over 200 places. The selection process is described as one of the toughest in the world, and is fiercely contested. The recruits have to run uphill for 40 minutes carrying a wicker basket containing rocks weighing 70lbs.

The Gurkha moto is "Khathar hunnu bhanda marnu ramrod" – "It is better to die than live a coward".



### **The Order of Gurkha Regiments**

1. The 1<sup>st</sup> Nasiri Battalion in 1815. Later the 1<sup>st</sup> King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles. (Made up of mainly Gurungs and Magars).
2. The Sirmoor Battalion (The Sirmoor Rifles) in 1815. Later the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles. (Made up of mainly Gurungs and Magars).
3. The Kumaon Battalion in 1815. Later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles. (Made up of mainly Gurungs and Magars).
4. The Cuttack Legion in 1817 (later the 6<sup>th</sup> Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles), made up mainly of Gurungs and Magars
5. The Fatehgarh Levy in 1817 (later the 9<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles), made up of mainly Chhetri.
6. The 16<sup>th</sup> or Sylhet Battalion in 1824 (later the 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles), made up of mainly Gurungs and Magars .
7. The Extra Goorkha Regiment in 1857 (later the 4<sup>th</sup> Prince Of Wales Own Gurkha Rifles), made up of mainly of Gurungs and Magars.
8. The Hazara Gurkha Battalion in 1858 (later the 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Gurkha rifles), mainly made up of Gurungs and Magars.
9. The 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Burma Infantry, raised from the Kubo Valley Police Battalion, who were issued with a beautiful alloy handled kukri, with a blued blade. Later known as the 10<sup>th</sup>. Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles mainly made up of Rai and Limbu.
10. The 8<sup>th</sup>. Gurkha Rifles in 1902 (later the 7<sup>th</sup> Duke Of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles), made up of mainly Rai and Limbu.



