



## **THE BEGINNING - GURKHAS, NEPAL AND THE EAST INDIA COMPANY**

Robert Clive's decisive victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757 firmly established British supremacy in India thereby opening the door for expansion of the Honourable East India Company. Some 10 years after Plassey the British started to come into contact with a unique and vigorous power on the northern borders of its newly won territories in Bengal and Bihar. This power was the city-state of Gorkha led by its dynamic King Prithwi Narayan Shah. Gorkha was a feudal hill village in what is now western Nepal, the village from which the Gurkha takes its name. Prithwi Narayan Shah and his successors grew so powerful that they overran the whole of the hill country from the Kashmir border in the west to Bhutan in the east. Eventually, as a result of boundary disputes and repeated raids by Gurkha columns into British territory, the Governor General declared war on Nepal in 1814. After two long and bloody campaigns a Peace Treaty was signed at Sugauli in 1816.

During the war a deep feeling of mutual respect and admiration had developed between the British and their adversaries, the British being much impressed by the fighting and other qualities of the Gurkha soldier. Under the terms of the Peace Treaty large numbers of Gurkhas were permitted to volunteer for service in the East India Company's Army. From these volunteers were formed the first regiments of the Gurkha Brigade, and from this time stems Britain's friendship with Nepal, a country which has proved a staunch ally ever since and has become our 'oldest ally' in Asia. Never has the trust that was then placed in the Gurkha soldier ever been in doubt. Alongside his British comrade in arms he has fought in many parts of the world and has proved himself to be of the closest of friends and bravest of allies that Britain has known.

'Keeping the Peace' in India under the British flag began for Gurkha soldiers with the Pindaree War in 1817, and the first battle honour gained by Gurkha troops was at Bhurtpore in 1826. The two senior regiments distinguished themselves in the hard fought battles of the 1st Sikh War in 1846, and six regiments of the Nepalese Army were offered to the East India Company for service in the 2nd Sikh War of 1848. In the Indian Mutiny of 1857-1858 the 2nd Goorkhas showed striking proof of their loyalty at Delhi where, together with the 60th Rifles (now part of the Royal Green Jackets), they held Hindu Rao's house, the key to the British position which was under continuous fire from the mutineers for over three months. During this period the 2nd Goorkhas suffered 327 casualties (including 8 of their 9 British Officers) out of a total strength of 490. Also during the mutiny, 12 Nepalese Army Regiments, a force of 8,000 men under the personal leadership of the Prime Minister of Nepal, took part in the final relief of Lucknow.

## **AFTER THE EAST INDIA COMPANY**

Throughout the next 50 years there was much active service in Burma, Afghanistan, the North-East and the North-West Frontiers of India, Malta, Cyprus, Malaya, China (the Boxer Rebellion of 1900) and Tibet (Younghusband's Expedition of 1903).

## **THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

At the outbreak of the First World War the whole of the Nepalese Army was placed at the disposal of the British Crown. Over 16,000 Nepalese troops were subsequently deployed on operations on the North West frontier and as garrison battalions in India to replace troops of the British Indian Army who had gone to fight overseas.

Some one hundred thousand Gurkhas enlisted in regiments of the Gurkha Brigade. They fought and died in France and Flanders, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, Gallipoli, Palestine and Salonika. A battalion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas greatly distinguished itself at Loos, fighting to the last, and in the words of the Indian Corps Commander, "found its Valhalla". The 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas gained immortal fame at Gallipoli during the capture from the Turks of the feature later known as "Gurkha Bluff". At Sari Bair they were the only troops in the whole campaign to reach and hold the crest line and look down on the Straits which was the ultimate objective. To quote from Field Marshal Sir William Slim's introduction to the second volume of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas' history:

"I first met the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles in 1915 in Gallipoli. There I was so struck by their bearing in one of the most desperate battles in history that I resolved, should the opportunity come, to try to serve with them. Four years later it came, and I spent many of the happiest, and from a military point of view the most valuable, years of my life in the Regiment".

## **BETWEEN THE WARS**

There was little respite after the First World war, with fighting in the Third Afghan War in 1919 followed by numerous campaigns on the North-West Frontier, particularly in Waziristan. Four Nepalese Army regiments also took part in operations on the North West Frontier during the Third Afghan War.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the Second World War there were no fewer than forty Gurkha battalions in British service, as well as parachute, garrison and training units. In all this totalled some 112,000 men. Side by side with British and Commonwealth troops Gurkhas fought in Syria, the Western Desert, Italy and Greece, from North Malaya to Singapore and from the Siamese border back through Burma to Imphal and then forward again to Rangoon.

In addition to the enormous manpower made available there were many personal gestures on the part of the Minister and Court of Nepal. Large sums of money for the purchase of weapons and equipment, including money for the provision of fighter aircraft during the Battle of Britain, were presented as gifts from Nepal. Considerable sums of money were also donated to the Lord Mayor of London during the Blitz for the relief of victims in the dockland area. An equally generous response was made to a variety of appeals for aid – all this from a country which was then, and still is by western standards, desperately poor. The spirit of this friendship can best be illustrated by the reply made to the Prime Minister of Nepal to the British Minister in Kathmandu after the fall of France in 1940. When Britain stood alone. Permission was sought to recruit an additional 20 battalions for the Gurkha Brigade, and for Gurkha troops to be allowed to serve in any part of the world. This was readily granted by the Prime Minister who remarked, “Does a friend desert a friend in time of need? If you win, we win with you. If you lose, we lose with you”. The whole of the Nepalese Army was again placed at the disposal of the British Crown. Eight Nepalese regiments were sent to India for internal security duties and for operations on the North West Frontier. Later a Nepalese brigade was sent to Burma and fought with particular distinction at the Battle of Imphal.

## THE PARTITION OF INDIA AND TRANSFER TO THE BRITISH ARMY

After the Second World War conflicts in Palestine, the Dutch East Indies, French Indo China, Borneo and the troubled partition of India claimed the attention and often the lives of officers and men of the Gurkha Brigade.

At the time of the partition of India there were ten Gurkha regiments in the Indian Army, each regiment consisting of a number of battalions. As a result of negotiations between the Nepalese, British and Indian Governments (known as the ‘Tripartite Agreement’) four of these regiments, each of two battalions were transferred to the British Army, the remainder staying with the new Indian Army. Thus on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1948, four Gurkha regiments became, for the first time, an integral part of the British Army, forming the Brigade of Gurkhas. These regiments were:

- 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII’s Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles)
- 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles (later Queen Elizabeth’s Own)
- 7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles (later Duke of Edinburgh’s Own)
- 10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles (later Princess Mary’s Own)

When these regiments moved to the Far East in 1948 they, with other units of the British Army already there, were formed into a division which, being largely Gurkha, was designated 17 Gurkha Infantry Division. After 1948 the following additional Gurkha units were raised:

- Gurkha Engineers (now The Queen's Gurkha Engineers)
- Gurkha Signals (now Queen's Gurkha Signals)
- Gurkha Army Service Corps (now The Queen's Gurkha Logistic Regiment)
- Gurkha Independent Parachute Company (Disbanded 1972)
- Gurkha Military Police (disbanded 1964)

### THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY

The Brigade of Gurkhas operated continuously throughout the Malayan Emergency, for twelve years (1948 to 1960) against Communist terrorists, and the Gurkha soldier again proved himself to be, as he has previously done in Burma, a superb jungle fighter. Whilst the majority of the rest of the British Army was fighting in such trouble spots as Korea, Cyprus, Kenya and Aden and maintaining a presence in the UK, Germany and other garrisons in various parts of the world, the Brigade of Gurkhas was providing the backbone, the expertise and the continuity in the campaign in Malaya. Many British units fought in the Malayan Emergency with distinction, but never for more than two or three years before moving on to other theatres. Gurkha battalions on the other hand served on year after year, providing the decisive ingredient for victory in this vicious war of stealth and attrition. A peaceful period of two years followed the successful conclusion of this campaign which enabled Gurkha units once again to widen their professional horizons and train for roles other than operating against Communist terrorists in the Malayan jungle. One Gurkha battalion was stationed in the United Kingdom (at Tidworth) in 1962, but was withdrawn to the Far East after the outbreak of the troubles in Borneo.

### BORNEO – THE BRUNEI REVOLT AND ‘CONFRONTATION’ WITH INDONESIA

Gurkha troops (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> KEO Gurkha Rifles) were the first to be used again in an operational role on the outbreak of the Brunei Revolt in December 1962. The battalion was alerted at 11pm on 7<sup>th</sup> December and the first company was air-landed in Brunei, nine hundred miles away, at 9 am the following morning. There followed four years of continuous operations against units of the Indonesian Regular Army in Sabah and Sarawak in which every unit of the Brigade of Gurkhas took part. As they did in the Malayan Emergency, Gurkha units again provided the bulk and the continuity of the British Army's contribution to this campaign. It was in November 1965 that Lance Corporal Rambahadur Limbu of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> PMO Gurkha Rifles won the Victoria Cross.

When the Borneo Campaign ended in 1966 there was a short lull before the Brigade found itself engaged in internal security tasks in Hong Kong during civil disturbances resulting from China's Cultural Revolution.

## BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE AND THE 'RUNDOWN' OF THE BRIGADE OF GURKHAS

Between 1967 and 1972, as a result of changing defence commitments and the reorganisation of the Armed Forces, the strength of the Brigade of Gurkhas was reduced from 14,000 to about 8,000. This was achieved by a reduction of the number of Gurkha infantry battalions from eight to five, reductions in the strength of the three corps units (Engineers, Signals and Transport) and the disbandment of the Gurkha Independent Parachute Company and the Gurkha Military Police. When British Forces withdraw from Singapore in 1971 three battalions of Gurkha infantry and the Gurkha Engineers, Gurkha Signals and Gurkha Transport Regiment were stationed in Hong Kong and the remaining two battalions stationed one in the United Kingdom (at Church Crookham) and the other in Brunei. In 1974 the battalion based in England (10<sup>th</sup> PMO Gurkha Rifles) deployed to Cyprus to reinforce the British Sovereign Base Area when Turkey invaded the Island. Since 1978 the United Kingdom based Gurkha battalion has taken its turn in helping to garrison Belize and in 1982 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 7<sup>th</sup> DEO Gurkha Rifles took part in the Falkland Islands Campaign. In the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait in 1990/91, the then Gurkha Transport Regiment provided 28 (Ambulance) Squadron and The Band of the Brigade of Gurkhas deployed as stretcher bearers.

In 1977, during the Silver Jubilee Year, the Queen honoured three units of the Brigade of Gurkhas. The Gurkha Engineers and Gurkha Signals received Royal titles and His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales was appointed Colonel-in-Chief of the 2<sup>nd</sup> KEO Gurkha Rifles. In 1992 the Gurkha Transport Regiment was redesignated The Queen's Own Gurkha Transport Regiment (now the Queen's Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment). Following the Government's decision to reduce and restructure the Army the Brigade reduced in size from 8000 to 3500 by 1998. In 1994 the four Rifle Regiments disbanded and were reformed into a large Regiment, The Royal Gurkha Rifles (RGR) which initially consisted of 3 battalions. His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales is the Regiment's Colonel in Chief. RGR reduced to two battalions in November 1996 when 3 RGR disbanded on the withdrawal of 1 RGR from Hong Kong to UK. At that time three Gurkha Rifle Companies were formed to reinforce the Infantry until 2005. The Brigade is also providing reinforcements for various specialist posts throughout the Army. The Corps Regiments have reduced in size to a Regimental Headquarters and squadrons (see below for breakdown and location of units); these squadrons are deployed within parent corps regiments.

There are currently some 3300 Gurkhas (effective strength) in the British Army (as at December 2004) organised into the following headquarters and units:

HQ The Brigade of Gurkhas	- Netheravon, UK
1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles	- UK
2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles	- Brunei
The Queen's Gurkha Engineers (RHQ and 2 Sqns)	- Maidstone, Kent, UK
The Queen's Gurkha Signals (RHQ and 3 Sqns)	- UK
The Queen's Own Gurkha Logistic Regiment	- Aldershot, UK
Gurkha Company (Sittang) (RMA Sandhurst)	- Camberley, Surrey, UK
Gurkha Company (Mandalay) (IBS Wales)	- Brecon, Wales, UK
Gurkha Company, 3rd Battalion ITC Catterick	- Catterick Garrison, UK
Brigade of Gurkhas Training Team	- UK
British Gurkhas Nepal (a HQ, with Depots in Kathmandu and Pokhara)	- Nepal
The Band of the Brigade of Gurkhas	- Sir John Moore Barracks, Shorncliffe, UK

## CONCLUSION

In the two World Wars the Gurkha Brigade suffered 43,000 casualties, and to date it has won 26 Victoria Crosses – 13 by Gurkhas and 13 by British Officers. This short chronicle is of necessity brief and factual. It cannot adequately portray the spirit and the character of the Gurkha soldier, nor can it reflect the 'esprit de corps' and the bond of comradeship and mutual respect which bind together the British and Gurkha officers and men of the Brigade. But perhaps these words written by the late Sir Ralph Turner MC (Professor of Sanskrit at the University of London, Fellow of Christ's College Cambridge and some time Adjutant of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles) in 1931, give a hint of the true feelings of both sides:

“As I write these words, my thoughts return to you who were my comrades.. Once more I hear the laughter with which you greeted every hardship. Once more I see you in your bivouacs or about your camp fires, on forced marches 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 unwavering lines disappear into the smoke and wrath of battle. Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had a country more faithful friends than you”.

