



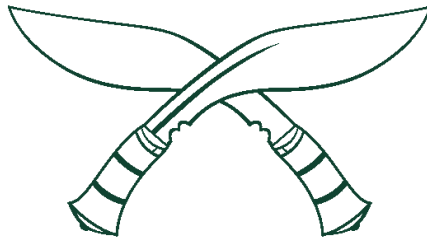
# THE GURKHAS

200 Years of Service  
to the Crown

**Major General J C Lawrence CBE**

*Foreword by HRH The Prince of Wales*

*Introduction by Joanna Lumley*



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## CLARENCE HOUSE

In April 1815, the Honorable East India Company began recruiting soldiers from the mountain Kingdom of Nepal. Since then, Gurkhas have continued to serve in the British Army with distinction, loyalty and courage. This book tells their remarkable story. It begins in 1814 when the British were halted in their tracks by a small army of mountain warriors and finishes with a remarkable chapter on the contribution that today's Gurkhas have been making in Afghanistan. The skirmishes and battles of the intervening years, including the two World Wars in which fifteen thousand Gurkhas died in the service of the Crown, are illustrated in the two hundred images in this book; one for every year of service. Although the book commemorates and celebrates two centuries of loyal Gurkha service to the Crown, it also aims to raise funds for the work of the Gurkha Welfare Trust; a charity of which I am proud to be Patron. It exists to enable retired Gurkhas to live out their lives with dignity; providing welfare services – ranging from pensions and residential homes for ex-Gurkhas, through to schools and water projects in the most remote regions of Nepal. It is a worthy cause. As the pictures in the book show, the standards, traditions and spirit of the Gurkhas have given a great deal to our country, and they have stood by us in our times of need. I commend both this book and the charity to you in this notable two hundredth year of loyal and dedicated Gurkha service.



Charles



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# Introduction

**Joanna Lumley OBE**  
**Vice Patron of the Gurkha Welfare Trust**

My father was a career officer in the 6th Gurkha Rifles and Gurkhas have therefore been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My parents were based in India when I was born and my early years were spent surrounded by Gurkhas and their families. They are a remarkable people. Proud yet humble, brave yet compassionate, my affection and respect for them runs deep. This is why I felt moved to help them in their quest for fair treatment. It's also why I am proud to introduce this book which tries to convey a sense of what makes them so special. I think it succeeds.

The book chronicles the remarkable service that Gurkhas have provided to the Crown over the last two hundred years. It's a fascinating story and it's remarkable to think that it all started on a lonely hilltop in northern India over two centuries ago. Since then, the Gurkha name has become synonymous with bravery, loyalty and courage. The Gurkha reputation has been hard won. Gurkhas have fought in nearly every conflict that Britain has been involved in for the last two centuries. From the Indian Mutiny and skirmishes on the North West Frontier, through two World Wars and more recent conflicts in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, Britain's Gurkhas have been in the thick of the fighting, earning twenty six Victoria Crosses since they became eligible for the award in 1911.

What might surprise many is that Gurkhas are still an important part of the British Army. Recruiting remains vibrant and a place in Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas is as fiercely contested today as it has always been – indeed, there were over eight thousand applicants for less than two hundred places last year! But though Gurkhas are thriving in the modern British Army, many of those who have served over the years are now entering the twilight years of their life.



Johanna Lumley OBE with Gurkhas at a Gurkha Welfare Trust event

The Gurkha Welfare Trust, a charity of which I'm proud to be Vice Patron, was set up in 1969 when it was apparent that many retired Gurkhas were living in conditions of abject poverty. A large number of these were veterans of the two World Wars. It's a little known fact but Britain recruited hundreds of thousands of Gurkhas during these two major conflicts. As this book shows, they served with distinction but, when peace eventually came, many were returned to civilian life without pensions. As they grew older, their ability to look after themselves in Nepal's harsh environment declined and many found themselves living in conditions of real privation. Every month, the Gurkha Welfare Trust still pays 6,899 of these veterans, or their widows, a pension of 7,000 rupees. It's not a huge amount of money but it is sufficient to enable them to live out the remainder of their lives with dignity – it is no less than they deserve for the sacrifices they made when Britain most needed them.

But the Gurkha Welfare Trust does far more than just pay pensions. It runs two residential homes for the most frail and provides one-off hardship grants for when our ex-soldiers face seemingly insurmountable problems. Over the years, the Trust's rural water and sanitation programme has installed water and sanitation schemes in 1,406 hill villages, benefiting over a quarter of a million people. It has constructed 125 schools and repaired or refurbished another 1,544 schools, bringing the gift of education to the families and communities of ex-Gurkhas in the remotest parts of Nepal. Recognising that more and

more Gurkhas are now settling in the UK, the Trust has set up two Welfare Advice Centres in the south of England. These help ex-Gurkhas and their families integrate into UK communities, providing a friendly and sympathetic source of advice. They also ensure that ex-Gurkhas who fall on hard times in the UK are looked after.

I have visited Nepal a number of times. One thing that always strikes me is the absence of decent medical care as you trek away from the urban centres. Life really is hard in the hills. Many families still exist by subsistence farming; it is in many ways a medieval existence. Illnesses that would be easily cured here in the UK kill thousands of people every year. That is why I am extremely proud of the Trust's Mobile Medical Camps. We run eight of these a year. They go up into the mountain villages and provide basic medical, dental, gynecological and ophthalmic care to over 14,500 people every year. There is huge potential to do a great deal more but, to do this, we need more money. It is money well spent and in this 200th year of Gurkha service to the Crown we have decided that this is what we should focus on. Every book that we sell will help provide more mobile doctors and more district nurses to look after those who need our help most. It is a worthy cause and I commend it to you. As you can see from the magnificent images in this book, the Gurkhas have done their bit for us when we have been at our most vulnerable as a nation; it is our turn now to do something for the brave warriors who, in their declining years, are at their most vulnerable.







# The British Empire Meets the Gurkhas

## 1814–1816

On 31 October 1814, Major General Sir Rollo Gillespie, an experienced and brave field commander,<sup>1</sup> was killed leading a force of East India Company and British troops against a remote hill fort in Kalunga, a small town in northern India. Despite being equipped with the most modern weaponry of the time, it took the British nearly a month to capture the fort. The defending force, which comprised only 650 soldiers from Nepal, inflicted heavy casualties on Gillespie's force of some 4,000 troops. That such a small contingent of 'native' troops had been able to halt the advance of a vastly superior force from one of the most competent armies in the world was a remarkable achievement. It shocked British India.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 1819, the historian Henry T Prinsep, then an officer of the Honourable East India Company's Civil Service, noted that '... the sinister shadow of these events, in damping the ardour of our own troops, and in giving courage to those of the enemy and hopes to the malcontents in every part of the ample surface of India, was for a long time counteracted by no one brilliant exploit in our arms'.<sup>3</sup>



Major General Sir Rollo Gillespie who was killed at the Battle of Kalunga on 31 October 1814 leading British and East India Company troops against the Gurkhas of Balbahadur Kunwar

The 'natives' at Kalunga (or Nalapani as it is now known) were Gurkhas, fighting men from the mountains of Nepal. Disciplined, well trained and commanded by capable and experienced officers, the Gurkhas had seized and then occupied vast tracts of India, then comprised of a multitude of petty principalities,<sup>4</sup> to the west, south and east of Nepal's own borders. With its own interests in northern India threatened by Nepal's enthusiastic expansion, the Supreme Government of the Honourable East India Company had dispatched an army of 30,000 troops, 60



mortal man.<sup>17</sup> The army dispatched to lay siege to Bhurtpore therefore included every artillery piece in northern India.<sup>18</sup> The fortress' walls, which were sixty feet thick, ran for five miles and it fast became apparent that it would take more than artillery to break into the well defended fortress.<sup>19</sup>

In early January 1826, the British started to mine under the ramparts of the great fortress. The Gurkhas, acting as skirmishers and marksmen, were 'conspicuously distinguished' in the way that they prevented the enemy from interfering with the force's mining operations.<sup>20</sup> On 18 January 1826, the British detonated a ten thousand pound mine that they had succeeding in placing under the walls.<sup>21</sup> The explosion created a breach, allowing British and East India Company troops to surge into the fortress. The two detachments from the Nusseree and Sirmoor Battalions were in the midst of the main assault. The fighting that followed was particularly fierce with approximately 14,000 of Durjan Sal's followers being either killed or wounded; the victor's losses amounted to less than 600.<sup>22</sup> On 20 January 1826, the young Raja was restored to

The Siege of Bhurtpore. The picture shows the blowing of a huge mine under the fort's ramparts on 26 January 1826 which breached the walls, allowing British and East India Company troops to storm the fort

the throne of his ancestors.<sup>23</sup> From the British perspective, the Siege of Bhurtpore was another important victory. Not only did it remove an immediate threat to British dominance but it sent a powerful message to others who might also have been contemplating open defiance of their imperial masters.

On 11 December 1845, the Sikh army crossed the River Sutlej, the disputed border between the powerful Sikh Kingdom of the Punjab and the East India Company's northwestern territories. Exactly why the Sikhs took such a provocative step remains unclear. One theory is that it was to pre-empt the British. Although the East India Company had signed a non-aggression treaty with the Sikh Durbar in 1809, they had been amassing forces, including pontoons and bridging equipment, on their side of the border for several months before the Sikhs crossed the Sutlej. It is therefore possible that the British had intended to launch an attack of their own, exploiting the disorder that had characterized the state since the death of its long time ruler, Maharajah Ranjit Singh, in 1839 in order to remove the last remaining force capable of challenging British dominance in northern India. Another theory is that it was part of a 'duplicious plan' devised by one of the two rival factions within the Punjab to weaken the Sikh army which, large and well trained, had become too powerful.<sup>24</sup>



A Gurkha soldier circa 1821

Whatever the reason, when the Sikhs crossed the River Sutlej the East India Company yet again found itself having to suppress a perceived challenge to its supremacy. The Nusseree and Sirmoor Battalions were deployed as part of an Army under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Hugh Gough, the Commander-in-Chief of the East India Company's Bengal Army. Of the four battles that make up what historians call the First Anglo-Sikh War, the Gurkha Battalions were involved in at least two, the Battle of Aliwal on 28 January 1846 and the Battle of Sobraon on 10 February 1846. The Sikhs, trained by Europeans,<sup>25</sup> were capable soldiers and, whilst their senior leadership might have been in disarray, they fought with courage and determination. The Sirmoor Battalion alone lost 49 dead at Aliwal whilst the Nusseree Battalion lost 6 dead with a further 16 wounded.<sup>26</sup> The casualties increased at the Battle of Sobraon. The Sikh forces, equipped with 70 cannon and numbering about 35,000,<sup>27</sup> had concentrated in a bridge-head on the eastern bank of the Sutlej. They held a fortified position which dominated the approaches to the river and



'Storming the Peiwar Kotal' by Vereker Monteith Hamilton. The painting shows men of the 5th Gurkhas and Seaforth Highlanders attacking the left flank of the Afghan position which was at the head of a steep valley

men with 18 artillery pieces,<sup>20</sup> occupied a defensive position at a place called Peiwar Kotal. It was a formidable position. Located at the head of a steep mountain valley, it was 9,400 feet (2,865 metres) above sea level.<sup>21</sup> Recognising that a frontal attack would have been destined to fail, the commander, Colonel Frederick Roberts VC, selected a small force, which included the 5th Gurkhas and the 72nd (later the 1st Seaforth) Highlanders, and carried out a night approach to try and seize the left flank of the Afghan position.<sup>22</sup> The attack was successful, allowing the remainder of Roberts' force to take the main enemy position.

Captain John Cook, an Edinburgh born officer who had joined the 5th Gurkhas on 27 March 1873,<sup>23</sup> distinguished himself throughout this operation, leading repeated charges against the enemy positions and, at one point, saving the life of a Major Galbraith, by wrestling to the ground a giant Afghan who was about to shoot Galbraith.<sup>24</sup> Cook was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. As this extract from his citation illustrates, it was well deserved:

“... Captain Cook charged out of the entrenchments with such impetuosity that the enemy broke and fled, when perceiving at the close of the melee, the danger of Major Galbraith who was in personal conflict with an Afghan soldier, Captain Cook distracted this attention to himself and aiming a sword cut which the Douranee avoided, sprang upon him and, grasping his throat, grappled with him. They both fell to the ground. The Douranee, a most powerful man, still endeavouring to use his rifle, seized Captain Cook’s arm in his teeth until the struggle was ended by the man being shot through the head.”<sup>25</sup>

Captain Cook died four months later of wounds he sustained during the subsequent advance on Kabul.<sup>26</sup> He is buried in the British Cemetery in the Afghan capital. Perhaps fittingly, the headstone from his grave is set in a wall alongside the names of officers and soldiers from Gurkha Regiments who have been killed in the British Army’s more recent operations in Afghanistan.

Eventually, Roberts succeeded in occupying Kabul. Sher Ali fled the city, leaving his son, Yakub Khan, as the new but unpopular Amir. A British Resident, Sir Louis Cavagnari, was installed in July 1879 and, for a period at least, there was relative calm.<sup>27</sup> But it was short lived. On 3 September 1879, Cavagnari was murdered.<sup>28</sup> Determined to avenge



The author (left) and another officer from the Royal Gurkha Rifles laying a wreath at the headstone of Captain John Cook VC's grave in Kabul's British Cemetery in September 2014

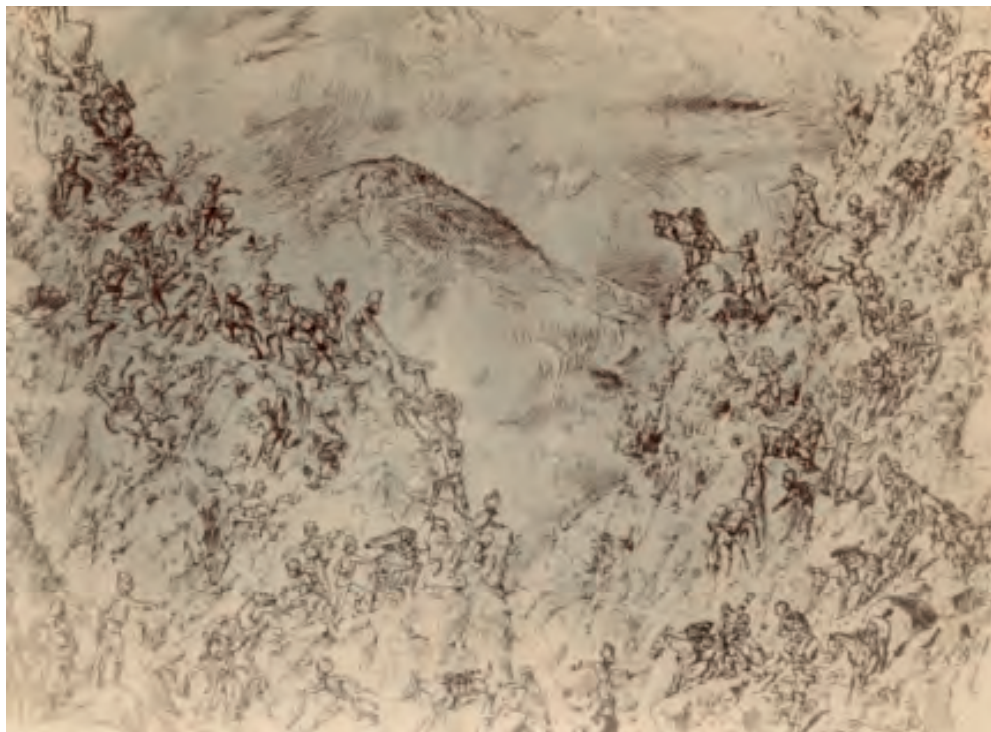


A painting of the Battle of Kandahar showing the capture of an Afghan gun by a young Rifleman of the 2nd Gurkhas

Some of the routine campaigns that were conducted along the border were significant. The Black Mountain Campaign of 1888, for example, involved the deployment of some 9,500 men as part of the hastily assembled Hazara Field Force.<sup>43</sup> The force deployed on 4 October 1888 to punish rebellious tribesmen for killing two British officers and four Gurkhas whilst they were conducting a reconnaissance patrol in the Black Mountains, a remote border area at the northern end of the Punjab.<sup>44</sup> Over the next month or so, the force killed between 150 and 200 tribesmen as it made its way deeper into the inhospitable mountains. After the destruction of several villages, the tribesmen agreed to British terms and, on 13 November 1888, the Hazara Field Force disbanded.<sup>45</sup> British losses totalled 32 dead (7 from disease) and 54 wounded.<sup>46</sup>

Described as “something of a forgotten colossus”, the Tirah Campaign of 1895 is also worth highlighting.<sup>47</sup> The British assembled an army of 44,000 men in order to regain control of the Khyber Pass and to retake

Gurkhas from the Hazara Field Force forcing their way deeper into the Black Mountains in 1888. The near vertical nature of the terrain made life difficult, even for the pack-mules used to carry supplies



Soldiers from 2/5th Gurkhas returning fire during an engagement in the Black Mountain Campaign of 1888







Soldiers from the 6th Gurkhas in the trenches of Gallipoli in 1915

notwithstanding the occasional success, the constant fighting took its toll on the Gurkhas who were always in the thick of it. Within 35 days of arriving at Gallipoli, for example, 2/10th had lost three quarters of its British officers and forty percent of its other ranks.<sup>44</sup> The Brigade was therefore pulled out of the line and given a month to recuperate on the Isle of Imbros,<sup>45</sup> an Allied staging post for operations on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

By August 1915, 29 Indian Infantry Brigade was back in action, this time as part of a new offensive further to the north in the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) area of operations. The plan was to seize the central Sari Bair massif in order to gain control of the Peninsula and isolate the Turkish forces which were causing so many problems down in the south. As Hamilton notes “the first step in the real push – the step which above all others was meant to count – was the night attack on the summits of the Sari Bair ridge.”<sup>46</sup> But the night attack did not go as planned and, as dawn broke on 9 August 1915, Allied troops had still not reached the crest of the ridgeline. 1/6th Gurkhas, under the command of Major Cecil Allanson, were eventually launched at the Sari Bair feature, the highest of the ridgeline’s peaks.<sup>47</sup> The fighting was intense, with Gurkhas drawing their kukris and using their weapons as clubs as the ammunition ran out. Eventually, supported by two companies of the South



Major Cecil Allanson under whose inspirational leadership the 6th Gurkhas succeeded in capturing the critical point of the Sari Bair Massif on 9 August 1915. A remarkable officer and superb athlete, Major Allanson held the Army record for the 2 miles for a number of years. He was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions at Sari Bair but received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO)

Lancashires, 1/6th reached the top of the peak, driving the Turks down the far side.<sup>48</sup> The Gurkhas pursued them until, being mistaken for fleeing Turks, they were engaged by the guns of HMS Colne.<sup>49</sup>

Once part of the ridgeline had been secured, the plan was that four battalions, under the command of General A H Baldwin, would then use the lodgement to exploit along the ridge, clearing the enemy's positions. But Baldwin's battalions had lost their way during the night approach and never arrived.<sup>50</sup> The Turks quickly counter-attacked, pushing the Gurkhas and reinforcements from the South Lancashires and the Wiltshires, off the ridgeline and pinning them down on the mountainside.<sup>51</sup> By this stage of the battle, all of 1/6th's British officers, less the medical

A painting by Terence Cuneo showing 1/6th Gurkhas assaulting well prepared Turkish positions on the highest feature of the Sari Bair Massif. The painting shows Major Cecil Allanson leading his men from the front



controlled the fort's water supply.<sup>18</sup> The British reacted by declaring war on Afghanistan on 6 May 1919, beginning the Third Anglo-Afghan War.<sup>19</sup> A force, which included 2/1st, 1/11th and 2/11th Gurkhas, was quickly despatched by lorry to relieve the besieged garrison at Landi Kotal.<sup>20</sup> After two significant engagements, known as the First and Second Battles of Bagh, the Afghans eventually withdrew. Notably, 1/11th played a key role in the Second Battle of Bagh on 11 May 1919, smashing through the Afghan defences to take the centre of the village.<sup>21</sup>



The Khyber Pass in the early 1920s. The Pass was strategically important as it was one of the few routes from Afghanistan into British India. It was the scene of considerable fighting during the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919

The withdrawing Afghans had a difficult time. Not only were they strafed by British aircraft but they were also ambushed by cut-off groups which the British, now expert at frontier warfare, had positioned on the likely escape routes.<sup>22</sup> The Afghan casualties were significant. In the Second Battle of Bagh alone they lost 100 killed and 300 wounded compared to the British casualties of 8 killed and 29 wounded.<sup>23</sup>

Recognising the tactical importance of the Khyber Pass as a route into India, the British despatched a brigade to secure it. By 13 May 1919, the brigade had advanced across the border and occupied the town of Dacca. Although this was achieved without opposition, the Afghans soon brought up reinforcements. The British encampment near the town was poorly sited and the Afghans were able to bring artillery and small arms fire to bear, inflicting considerable casualties.<sup>24</sup> Two battalions, the 1/35th Sikhs and the 1/9th Gurkhas,<sup>25</sup> were therefore sent to clear the surrounding hills but the attack faltered until further reinforcements, which included 2/1st Gurkhas, were despatched to support them.<sup>26</sup>

The situation on the North West Frontier was becoming increasingly precarious. Not only were the British having to fight the regular Afghan

Gurkhas guarding captured tribesmen in Waziristan circa 1920





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