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Major General Craig Lawrence at the launch of his two books in Waterstones, Salisbury.
Picture: Johnny Fenn

Setting scenes both fictional and real in the pages of books

BY ELIZABETH KEMBLE

A major general from Salisbury has become an author with two very different books now on sale.

Craig Lawrence CBE began his debut novel – *The Legacy* – during a short story writing course at Salisbury College in the late nineties and eventually finished it while serving in Afghanistan during the 2014 presidential elections.

The adventure thriller is set in Nepal, London, Edinburgh and Dartmoor – with Salisbury also receiving a mention – and revolves around the lives of an eclectic bunch of people.

It was at the college, he says, that he learned the value of deadlines in ensuring the progress of his writing, and also which characters should never appear in books.

“I remembered from my short story course

that happy, perfect, financially-secure people make dreadful characters, whereas emotional, insecure people with character flaws give you something to go on,” he said.

“I joined the class in Salisbury out of a sense of disappointment with some books. I had just finished a Clive Cussler book and was reading one by Joanna Trollope.

While the first was full of adventure and action, there was less depth to the characters.

“In Trollope’s books the characters are far more real but the story can move along quite slowly.

“I wanted to put characters who have real depth so you can build a relationship with them in a fast-paced action setting.”

Tinkering with various bits of writing, Lawrence wrote pieces for regimental magazines but it was while studying for a masters in conflict security and development,

during a sabbatical from the Army, that his novel really began to take shape.

“I was going up and down on the train, commuting into London to get to King’s College, and decided I would use that time sensibly.

“I started writing it during the Salisbury College course and finished it in Afghanistan – it was quite cathartic in an environment where you’re doing operational stuff, to sit in your room and immerse yourself back in Dartmoor or Edinburgh.”

Lawrence, who grew up in North Yorkshire, read engineering science at Durham University and was commissioned into the 2nd King Edward VII’s Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles) in 1984.

Moving to Wiltshire in 1997 when he was posted to the old Land Headquarters in Wilton as a young major, he met his

wife, Laura, who was a chiropodist in the town, getting married a year later.

“Ever since then, I have had a house in Salisbury. While I moved away to Edinburgh and had overseas postings, home has always been Salisbury,” he says.

During his career, Lawrence, who has three sons and two daughters, has served in the UK, Germany, Nepal, Hong Kong, Canada, South Africa, Kenya, Belize and Brunei and has commanded Gurkhas on operations in Bosnia and the Ivory Coast.

Currently colonel of the Royal Gurkha

trawled through thousands of images to find corresponding ones that would eventually make up the 345 images in the book.

“The Gurkha Museum in Winchester has a huge archive of imagery. If you go back to pre-1947, there were ten Gurkha regiments and all had someone in charge of historical records and photograph albums.

“In 1947, the independence of India saw six regiments remain in the Indian Army and four transfer into the British Army. Luckily, we still have many of the archives from the ones that remained in India.

you needed some soldiers in the past, you just upped the number of Gurkhas you recruited – that’s hugely attractive for a government.”

In writing the book, Lawrence says he was able to gain a greater understanding of the early years of the force, which displayed such resilience in the face of the enormous military machine of the British East India Company Army as it rolled across India, dominating and virtually enslaving people as it went.

“The sheer number of Gurkhas involved in Britain’s wars also surprised me, particularly during the two world wars. During the first, just over 90,000 Gurkhas fought, with Nepal opening its doors to allow more British Gurkhas to be recruited and also sending its own soldiers to support the British.

“During the Second World War, the number of Gurkhas increased to 138,000.”

The Gurkhas: 200 Years of Service to the Crown contains a foreword written by HRH The Prince of Wales and an introduction by Joanna Lumley OBE. The actress, who spearheaded the Gurkha Justice Campaign, also attended the recent London launch of the book.

All the royalties from the Gurkha book are going to the Salisbury-based Gurkha Welfare Trust, helping it to support communities in Nepal as they try to pick up their lives after the recent earthquakes.

On his return from Afghanistan in September 2014, Lawrence became director of Joint Warfare, responsible for the high-level training of the UK’s high readiness forces.

And he is also 10,000 words into his second novel, called *Reasonable Doubt*, which takes some of the characters from his first

novel and pits them against oil companies and separatist movements set in the Niger Delta.

He said: “My job in Afghanistan was to act as the interface between Afghan political institutions and the military and between the military and the UN.

“I was basically right in the centre, it was brilliant – we were seeing history being made.

“They always say you should write about what you know and play to your strengths and that’s what I try to do – I met some tremendous characters in the UN and some tremendous villains in Afghanistan, I also know Nepal and Edinburgh, my wife is from Dartmoor and I enjoy scuba-diving.

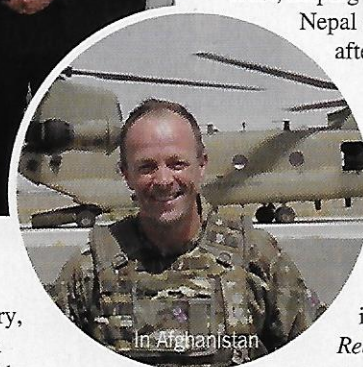
“There was a gallery opposite our home in Edinburgh which always had Scottish landscapes in its windows so you weave that in, and the other day I was walking through St Pancras Station, where there’s a piano and a chap was playing Gershwin, so I did some music research – I’m really enjoying it, it’s just fun.”

Both *The Legacy* and *The Gurkhas: 200 Years of Service to the Crown* are available online and from all good book stores.

Reasonable Doubt will be published early next year.



Major General Craig Lawrence with Joanna Lumley, the Queen's Gurkha Orderly Officers and Sgt Dipprasad Pun CGC



Rifles, Lawrence has spent more than 30 years serving with the Gurkhas, and it was his close ties with the unit that prompted his involvement in writing a commemorative history of the Gurkhas from 1815 to 2015.

“There were lots of events planned for 2015, such as the Royal Parade, to celebrate the 200 years and we thought there should be a book so that after the year has gone, there would be an enduring reminder of 200 years.

“I volunteered to do it after the person who had originally agreed to write it was unable to do so.

“I didn’t really have much idea of what it would involve. Rather naively, I thought I would combine what other people had written and cross reference it with historical archives but what had been written wasn’t right in some areas and I found myself starting to do my own research into the history, particularly of the early years – which isn’t really covered in the books that are already out there.

“The more research I did, the more I realised that I wanted to take a different approach.

“Rather than just narrate the history of the Gurkhas by describing 200 years worth of events, I wanted to focus more on the people involved, using them and their achievements to tell the story.”

Taking extracts from historical archives and cross referencing these with diary entries that people had written, Lawrence

“The British Army’s four, which were all infantry, were based around Malaya and were eventually joined by units of Gurkha signallers, engineers and logisticians which were formed at the start of the Malayan Emergency.”

Recruiting for the brigade of Gurkhas remains strong.

Out of 8,000 applicants, only 230 soldiers are selected from Nepal on an annual basis – they are fit and well-educated, attracted to a role which is both exciting and, relative to the average income in Nepal, lucrative.

“Adaptable and on the cutting edge of operations, they also provide soldiers to the Special Forces and can add real value in places where a white face might not be such a welcome presence,” Lawrence explains.

“They can have empathy with the people in developing countries.

“Every time there is a Defence Review, the Gurkhas start to look attractive to those making cuts but you keep coming back to the fact they’re so good at what they do and they are highly adaptable.

“For example, there’s a Battalion of Gurkhas in Brunei providing a UK presence where a British regiment might not be so acceptable to the local population.

“Also, strategically, having a relationship with Nepal is a real benefit to the UK – when