

THE ROYAL BRITISH

LEGION

JUNE 2020



VE DAY 75

HOW WE REMEMBERED
IN LOCKDOWN

LIVE ON

THE ROYAL BRITISH
LEGION

BADGE OF HONOUR

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS
OF MILITARY EVENTS

MAJOR GENERAL
CRAIG LAWRENCE CBE
THE ROYAL GURKHA RIFLES

1983-2016

"AS A YOUNG
OFFICER, I THOUGHT
I HAD TO HAVE
THE ANSWER TO
EVERYTHING, BUT
I LEARNED IT'S ALL
ABOUT TEAMWORK"



I grew up in the village of Kirk Smeaton in North Yorkshire and hadn't been out of Yorkshire until I was 18 and went to study Engineering Science at Durham

University. My dad had a small chain of four shoe shops and was keen that I should follow in his footsteps, but selling shoes didn't appeal to me. Joining the Army struck me as an opportunity to go abroad and do something exciting. I visited 13 different Regiments and one of those was the 7th Gurkhas, who had just come back from the Falklands. I was commissioned as a student into the 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles) in 1983, and every university summer holiday I spent a few weeks with them as a probationary officer. I felt increasingly at home.

As a young officer, I thought I had to have the answer to everything, but I learned fast that it's all about teamwork, whether you're in Brunei rainforest or on exercise on Salisbury Plain.

I also had an early introduction to the concept of commemoration – and how important that is – when I joined my battalion in Hong Kong in the late Eighties. I'd had a great three years there when, one Sunday morning during a *khud* race – a hill race Gurkhas are famous for – my hugely respected Company Commander was murdered. A grenade had been attached to the back of his desk drawer and as he opened it, he pulled the pin out of the grenade, which killed him and wounded the Gurkha officer who was with him. The military police investigated, but the guy who was thought to have done it was never apprehended. Because he wasn't killed on operations – it was something that happened in the course of routine business – there's very little to say that he ever served in the Regiment. He gets a brief mention in the Regimental history, but there's nothing that really describes his contribution. His death broke his father, and I realised it's so important to commemorate and to record formally what happens.

As a Gurkha paratrooper, I spent time in the UK's airborne brigade, as well as on tours, including Nepal, South Africa and Belize. After staff college in my 30s, I took over my company and we were deployed in the Balkans, as part of the NATO-led Stabilisation Force. Bosnia had its moments, but it was benign compared to Afghanistan, where the battalions started deploying in 2002. Afghanistan had an intensity for those on the ground, a constant exposure to violence, danger and death.



For the launch of his first book on Gurkha history, Craig was joined by Joanna Lumley, the two Queen's Gurka Orderly Officers and Sgt Dipprasad Pun, who was decorated for gallantry in Afghanistan



The Regiment lost 14 people in Afghanistan – four officers and 10 soldiers – and these were people I knew, of course. By that

time, I was Colonel of the Regiment, so I was in a staff job in the UK, but one of my responsibilities was going with families to meet the bodies as they came back into Wootton Bassett or RAF Lyneham. It's heartbreaking. The Hercules lands, soldiers carry the coffin out, and it's the first time the family knows it's not a mistake. They know there have been no crossed wires. It's incredibly poignant.

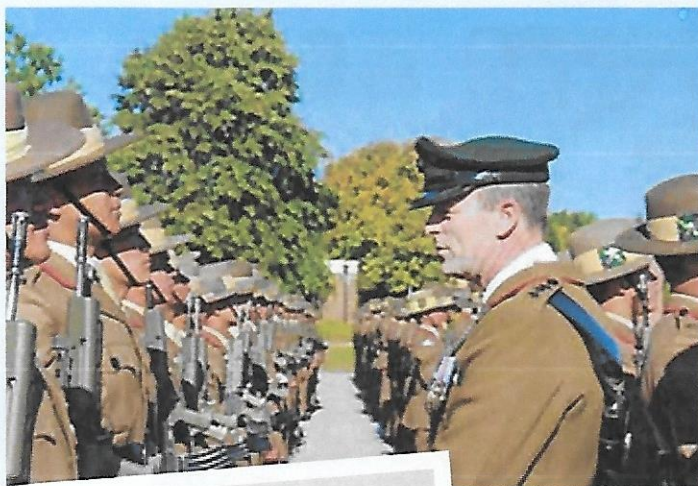
It really mattered that I could share the experience of those people by going to Afghanistan myself. I felt that strongly, but the more senior you are, the harder it is to get to operational theatres because there are fewer appointments for people at senior rank. In 2013, however, there was a plan for my brigade to go. We did all the training, I learned Pashto, then at the last minute we were told we weren't going and another brigade was sent to Afghanistan instead.

I was gutted to the point of almost resigning. I was so angry. I felt really bad as I'd been there at the funerals of soldiers, there receiving bodies coming back, there handing out medals that I didn't have, so I cast around for any job I could to get myself to Afghanistan. Although it was in a much lesser way – I wasn't out on the ground dodging bullets and bombs – I needed to have that affinity with those soldiers.

In late 2013, I was sent as a Brigadier with the International Security Assistance Force's Election Support Cell to an HQ

Opposite: Pictured in Afghanistan in 2014
Above: HRH The Prince of Wales wrote the foreword for Craig's most recent book on the Gurkhas





“I’M IMMENSELY PROUD OF THE GURKHAS I’VE SERVED WITH”

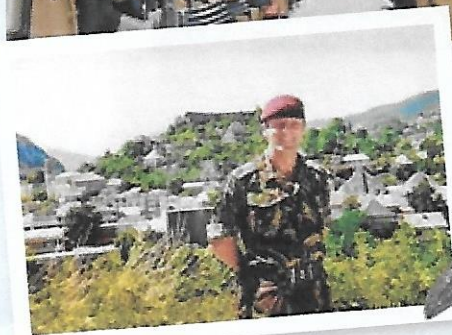
I first took on my company, he did an operational tour with me in Bosnia, and he had gone on to become a Gurkha Major, the most senior rank that Gurkhas could get to then. We were talking about Afghanistan and the losses, and about how there was nothing tangible that the soldiers’ families could touch to celebrate their lives or commemorate their deaths. Hitman said, ‘Someone has to tell the story,’ which led to my book *Gurkha*. I have a deep affection for the Gurkhas I served with, and the book is about ensuring that what they have achieved is recorded. It also describes what every one of the 14 soldiers and officers who were killed in Afghanistan was doing, why they were doing it and how they died. We owe it to families to say: ‘This is the role that your son, husband, father or sibling played.’

Gurkhas were excellent in Afghanistan because they’re good with people and they understand how hard it is for an Afghan to eke out a living on a hillside. The soldiers we recruit often come from smaller villages in Nepal where people have to rely on each other – it’s a much less self-centred society than ours and there’s that recognition that you have to support each other. I think that has rubbed off on me. I think I’m a better person for having served with Gurkhas.

And if you’re exposed to people like my friend Hitman, who point out your flaws, albeit in a gentle way, this gives you a sense of humility. You see so many senior officers who don’t have that, and hubris has been at the root of many military disasters.

I’m more accepting now that you need other people’s ideas to solve problems, and the more complex the problem, the more you need contributions from a diverse group. I can’t say enough times how immensely proud I am of the Gurkhas I’ve served with and how the experience has shaped me.”

Gurkha – 25 Years of The Royal Gurkha Rifles by Major General (Retd) JC Lawrence CBE FRGS (Unicorn, £30) is out now. www.craiglawrence.co



commanded by a senior American to help ensure the 2014 elections were democratic. I was told: ‘We need to make the Afghan elections more transparent, credible and legitimate. Off you go.’ There was little other guidance, so it was a fascinating exercise to come up with a set of conditions that would deliver. We looked at things like ensuring equal access to polling stations by different ethnicities, that women were encouraged to vote, and that all the electoral material got to different places, and we worked with the UN, the international community and the Afghan election institutions. It was really fulfilling and I think we made a difference.

The downside of operational tours is that families find them hard. Every time the phone rings at a funny hour, you think something must have happened. Eleven months in Kabul took its toll on my wife Laura and our five kids, without a doubt.

Back in the UK, I was promoted to Major General and spent 18 months as the Director of Joint Warfare in London, but in 2015, I decided to leave the Army for the sake of my family. I did a final trip to Nepal as Colonel of the Regiment just after the earthquakes, and met my old friend Hitman. He had been my second in command when

Clockwise from top: Craig was Colonel of the Regiment from 2009 to 2016; a Gurkha kukri; on Operation Lodestar in Bosnia, 1997