

The race to be a Gurkha

Joining the Gurkhas brings rich rewards for young Nepalese, but first they must pass a gruelling physical challenge

By Rob Blackhurst

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It is just before dawn in the city of Pokhara in central Nepal. The canopy of stars, unspoilt by light pollution, is fading, and the shadows of some of the tallest mountains in the world are looming.

But the scene is far from peaceful: lorries are already carrying goods to market, and teenagers on mopeds are weaving their way through the traffic, dodging the occasional cow, en route to work. Off a quieter side street, behind iron gates, a group of young men are sitting in tense, cross-legged silence, waiting for the chance to be selected for the British Army.

These men, aged between 17 and 21, are among the final 300 competing for 126 places in the Brigade of Gurkhas. Success will mean a Western salary and a pension for life, together with the right to settle in Britain. Their earnings, enormous by Nepalese standards, will allow their parents to retire and will secure the economic future of their families. Failure will see them return to their villages with only their reimbursed bus fares in their pockets.

Some of them have travelled, day and night, for three days to be here. Before coming, many have been blessed by a Brahmin who daubed a red tilaka on their foreheads. Most have visited a

barber and bought a new pair of trainers. One by one they are waiting to be processed, when they will be assigned a number and given an army regulation cup and plate to keep with them. After their first introduction to a meagre variation of the English cooked breakfast – boiled egg, baked beans and unappetising luncheon meat – they will begin central selection.



Lt Col Elton Davis, who is the deputy commander of the British Gurkhas in Nepal, says, 'Our ethos is to be free, fair and transparent. Here, nobody really expects people to be free, fair or transparent. We hammer it home when we go out into the hills during the selection process. We are not selecting based on geography or caste.'

Recruitment is assisted by the Galla Wallahs – former servicemen employed to visit remote villages and spread the word about the possibilities of an army career. In previous decades, in a country with poor communications and transport, this face-to-face work was essential. But nowadays even remote villages have mobile phones and some exposure to the internet.

Last year 90 per cent of applicants to the Gurkhas had visited the MoD website. This year there were 36 candidates registered for every available place – far more than for soldiers in the rest of the Army. Most Gurkhas still come originally from the martial castes – the Gurungs, Magars, Rais and Limbus – that have supplied young soldiers for centuries. But the sons of these villagers now tend to live with relations in the main towns to complete their education at better schools. 'We used to send our ex-servicemen up to the hills to gather a few pied-piper candidates,' Lt Col Davis says. 'But we no longer find the young boys in the hills there.'

The historical quirk of an army recruiting men from a different sovereign country is unique in Europe. Its origins lie in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, when the ferocity of the Gurkhas in battle so impressed the British East India Company that it offered to recruit them, forming the

first Gurkha brigade. After Indian partition in 1947 the Gurkha regiments were divided up between the British Army and the new Indian army.

The two countries agreed to link pay to 'local salaries' in the places where they served – for the British Gurkhas Malaya and Hong Kong – which, though tax-free, were much lower than those in the UK. After a series of legal challenges by former and serving Gurkhas that the MoD won, it was decided finally to equalise pay and conditions for all serving Gurkhas with those of other British soldiers in 2006.



Globalisation means that the Gurkha recruits of 2014 are a world away from those that the Army recruited in previous decades. In the 1980s the BBC made *The Gurkhas*, a documentary about the hill boys arriving at central selection, some of whom brought parcels of yak's milk cheese. Those selected had to be taught to tie shoelaces and use a knife and fork. They would be taken to the nearby river to bathe in the icy meltwater from the Himalayas. And, singularly in the Army, a daily ration of rum was distributed because of the Nepalese belief that this would prevent mosquito bites.

Today's recruits need to be fitter and have more formal qualifications than their predecessors a generation ago. They are now not allowed to register unless they have a Standard School Leaving Certificate and a machine-readable passport to prove that they are a Nepalese citizen. They have to be at least 158cm (5ft 2in) tall and have no more than four fillings, gaps or false teeth. Any ligament tears or old fitness injuries are scrutinised. A recent barrier that has seen some applicants rejected is laser eye surgery, which gives a greater risk of rupturing the eyeball if they are struck in the face.

More testing are the requirements to be able to run 800m in two minutes 45 seconds, do 12 pull-

ups and 70 sit-ups, and to face a final interview that is half in English and half in Nepali. If applicants fail, they are allowed to reapply until they reach the age limit of 21. 'We sometimes take people on their third or fourth attempt because they've shown a huge amount of dedication,' Capt Richard Roberts, the deputy recruiting officer in Nepal, says.

A painstaking task for the recruitment teams is verifying the candidates' documents – forgeries are easily available in Nepal. It has been known for failed applicants to reapply under a false identity. 'But the Area Recruiting Officers are sharp on this and they recognise people,' Capt Roberts says. 'I couldn't say 100 per cent but 99.9 per cent.'

Although becoming a Gurkha remains a great source of family pride, it is no longer the only route out of Nepal for young men with ambition. In some villages almost all the young men have left – mainly for jobs in construction, tourism and security in the Middle East, Europe and Australia. It is estimated now that remittances from Nepalese working abroad contribute more than £2 billion a year to Nepal's annual income – equivalent to a quarter of the country's GDP.

It is a chilly December morning and we are in a spectacular gorge in Pokhara. Next to us, a fast-flowing aquamarine river burbles as the recruits put 25kg bags of sand into their doko – a traditional wicker basket carried on their backs. This is the hardest physical challenge of Gurkha recruitment – perhaps anywhere in the British Army: a 5km uphill run that has to be completed in less than 48 minutes, an ascent of more than 400m through dusty and rocky trails. On the starting line they are warned that they cannot push anyone else, and if they get any help from relations lining the course they will be disqualified. 'It's a test of stamina, character and commitment,' Col James Robinson, Colonel Brigade of Gurkhas, says. 'And it separates the men from the boys.'

Once they begin, all the preparation, the months of practice pounding these mountain tracks and the timed rehearsals, kicks in. As the candidates slog past farm shacks and old-fashioned hay mounds, the Nepalese Gurkha sergeant majors shout encouragement at them. There is a spectacular view of the Himalayas from the top of the course but these young men couldn't be more oblivious. Many collapse exhausted over the finishing line. They are not told whether they have passed, but those who fail will be out of the selection process. 'There is such high pressure,' Col Robinson says. 'People have invested a lot so we don't want someone jumping off the gorge on the way back. If they fail something we tell them back at base the next morning, which gives them the opportunity to slide off.'



Major Jonny Taffs is an Army education and training officer. He has come to Nepal for the first time to run the English tests. 'I'm completely impressed by the standard. We're probably getting the top half of people in school. We ask, "What would you do if you failed?" and the vast majority would continue their studies. I may be generalising but I don't see that same passion for education in the UK.' The hardest challenge is the written test, which this year required candidates to write an essay on whether the British Army will always recruit Gurkhas. 'No one flunks outright,' Major Taffs says. 'No one breaks pencils and walks out. Everyone bangs out almost two sides. And the quality of the handwriting for almost all of them is really good.'

The recruits take their listening exam in what looks like an English school gym. As their hands and pockets are checked for notes, tension is etched into their faces. They listen to a comprehension on changes to army boots throughout the ages. 'For many it's the first time they've listened to a native speaker,' Major Taffs says. 'They will be given orders in English in a stressful situation, and we need to make sure that even before they get to training they have the ability to tune in to that very quickly.'

Recruits invest a huge amount of time and money in becoming Gurkhas and family expectations are high, so failure can be crushing. 'There's a lot of pressure on the oldest son to take over the mantle of the wage-earner,' Major Taffs says. 'So this is like a golden ticket. We had to tell a guy this morning that he was unsuccessful – and he was in bits. It was his last chance. He had had three goes at selection. And he just didn't want to go.'



'You have the coin of their life within your hands. Heads, their lives change for ever, and tails, they go back home. But you have to remind yourself that even to get this far they are showing qualities that will make them successful. They are not going to go back and starve on the streets.'

Suraj Dhimal's father is a driver. He is a Gurkha candidate in the traditional mould – from a family in the hills who are ambitious to improve their lot. 'It is my father's dream that his eldest son will be part of the Gurkhas,' he says. 'And I can help my family too.' When I ask what he knows about Britain, his face lights up. 'I'm a Manchester United fan and love Mr Wayne Rooney.' It has been a sacrifice for his family to pay for Suraj for a year while he prepared for selection. 'I don't think I'll be able to try again next year because I don't think my family can support me for the selection another time.' This is his second attempt. 'I did some things wrong and wasn't focused well last year. But I've now improved my English by looking at the BBC.' (He doesn't get in.)

In contrast Satyam Niroua Chhetri, 18, speaks almost perfect English as a result of being brought up by two English teachers who encouraged him to read British newspapers, despite having never been abroad. Like many applicants, he has relations who have had military careers; his uncle is currently in the Nepalese army and his grandfather was in the Gurkhas. If he doesn't succeed he will return to his studies to get a degree in engineering science. He is living away from home for the first time, and that is what most potential recruits find the most difficult. (He does get in.)



At the end of the two-week selection process it is time for the 126 candidates with the highest score overall to be selected. Wearing their numbered red bibs, they file one by one in front of Capt Roberts to learn whether their year of training has paid off. It's a brutal process. The successful go upstairs and are formally handed over to the Gurkhas. Within a few hours they will be issued with kit and measured for their mufti – civilian suits that they wear when they're off base (giving them a universal reputation for being extremely smartly dressed).

A fortnight later they will find themselves on a flight, usually the first of their lives, to Manchester. From there they will head to their training base in Catterick on the North Yorkshire moors, which they won't leave for the first 10 weeks of training. The base is notorious for its cold winds, exposed moorlands and deep winter snows. Because of training timetables, the Gurkhas are always there in January and February, the worst time of year. For Capt Rupert Anderson, their commanding officer, this is important given that the Gurkhas are trained in an infantry role. 'They've gone from glorious Pokhara with a lovely temperature, and they come here. But I also think it's why Gurkhas are good soldiers, because they are learning in the wet,

the cold, the wind.’

Some of the cultural differences are obvious. Feet that are used to flip-flops have to adjust to wearing army boots. Western lavatories have to be explained to those who have grown up with squat toilets. Pedestrian crossings and waiting for the green man have to be explained. As part of their education, they study Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and visit the author’s home in Whitby. (One recruit last year, on the bus to Whitby, thought he was going to meet the real *Dracula*.) For many from land-locked Nepal, it is the first time that they have seen the sea. Although they will have seen snow from a distance on the Himalayas, many of them will never have touched it or thrown a snowball.



Catterick marks the beginning of the troops’ 12 contracted minimum years in the Army. During their training, like every other recruit, they will earn £900 per month. (Average earnings in Nepal are £150 per month.) Very few are married, but those who are will have to wait three years to bring their wives to Britain. For the Army the Gurkhas represent good value because of their 100 per cent retention rate. Every candidate completes his basic training in Catterick and all

choose to serve a full 22-year contract. In the regular Army many leave after five years. Since 1997 all Gurkhas have been granted settlement rights in Britain with their families after they have served (famously championed by Joanna Lumley); hardly any return to Nepal.

It is late January in North Yorkshire and the first time that the recruits have been out on exercise – or 'combat camping', as it is known. It is 6am, still dark, and the temperature is hovering around freezing. Here they are learning the basics of how to be an infantry soldier – how to apply their camouflage paint and conceal themselves, how to clean their SA-18 rifles and keep them within their sight at all times, and how to look out for symptoms of cold in each other. They sleep in shell-scrapes – shallow trenches dug into the sodden earth covered by thin plastic sheets. Surprisingly, they've managed to snatch six hours' sleep in the cold night. They are now heating water using a hexi block, a kind of firelighter, to boil their maple syrup bun and omelette ration packs. They clean their teeth with the leftover boiled water.

Their training officers conduct a foot inspection – as the Army has been doing since the Zulu wars. They sit in a huddle, take their boots off and apply foot powder. One recruit is struggling to find his in his backpack. 'Permission to use someone else's foot powder, Sir?' he asks in Nepali. 'No, get your own out,' comes the reply. Next is toothbrush inspection. They have all been told to clean their teeth in the morning – but there has been so much to do that some haven't remembered. Their instructor calls them one by one with their toothbrush in front of them. He runs a single finger over the bristles to see if it has been used. Anyone with a completely dry brush is given 15 press-ups. 'Next time I will give you double,' he says. Satyam Niroua Chhetri has never travelled before, but England isn't too much of a shock because he had already Googled photos of Manchester airport and Catterick. With his first pay cheque, he is planning to buy a laptop and explore Britain when he is allowed off the base.



The Gurkhas escaped abolition in the recent Government defence review (the costs of maintaining facilities in Nepal is a tempting target for MoD accountants) but was subject to deep cuts. In January the latest phase of cuts resulted in the redundancy of 350 Gurkhas. By the end of the latest cuts the Gurkhas will have shrunk from 3,600 to about 2,600, with 1,000 redundancies. (According to Col Robinson, they have all found other work in Britain.) In addition to the heavy cuts faced by the rest of the service, the Gurkhas faced an additional problem because, when their conditions of service were brought into line with those of other soldiers in the British Army in 2007, they were able to serve for 22 years rather than the previous 15-year contract. Since few left before the 22 years, the brigade became overmanned – leading to even deeper cuts. For now, however, the lingering question mark over the ability of the Army to recruit enough good soldiers at home has safeguarded the regiment's future, albeit in diminished form.

As Nepal rises economically along with the rest of Asia, it may be the old martial code of honour, the desire to travel and the thirst for adventure that will keep thousands of Nepalese boys applying to join the Gurkhas each year. As Capt Anderson says, 'Their loyalty doesn't come through money, they're not mercenaries. In the past joining the British Army was definitely the only way out of Nepal. That's not true now.'

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