

Who Are The Gurkhas?

Gurkhas are recruited from the hill people of Nepal who trace their roots back to an 8th century Hindu warrior, Guru Gorakhnath. They first encountered the British in the Gurkha War of 1814-1816. The Peace Treaty that ended the war enabled Gurkhas to serve under contract in the East India Company's army, for whom they first fought in the Pindaree War of 1817. Thus began Britain's relationship with Nepal, its 'oldest ally' in Asia.

Gurkhas fought on the British side in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, becoming a part of the British Indian Army. In recognition of their service, the 2nd Gurkha Rifles was awarded the Queen's Truncheon, a unique emblem which is believed to have magical powers. Recruits to The Royal Gurkha Rifles still swear allegiance to the Crown and the Regiment on the Truncheon.

From 1857 until 1947, the Gurkha regiments saw service in Burma, Afghanistan, the North-East and North-West Frontiers of India, Malta, Cyprus, Malaya, China, Tibet, and in various theatres of the First and Second World Wars. They have served in every major conflict since. **Following the partition of India in 1947**, an agreement between Nepal, India and Britain meant four Gurkha regiments from the Indian army were transferred to the British Army, eventually becoming the Gurkha Brigade.

British officials in the 19th century declared the Gurkhas as a 'Martial Race', a term describing people thought to be 'naturally warlike and aggressive in battle' possessing qualities of courage, loyalty, self-sufficiency, physical strength, resilience, orderliness, the ability to work hard for long periods of time, fighting tenacity and military strength.'

"If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or he is a Gurkha." (Former Chief of staff of the Indian Army, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw)

Gurkhas are famed for carrying a kukri. It is the national weapon of Nepal, but it is also used as a work tool in the Hills. Each Gurkha carries two kukris, one for everyday use and one for ceremonial purposes. Many tall-tales exist about the kukri, the most common being the myth that whenever you draw the kukri from its sheath you must also draw blood. The kukri is accompanied by two small knives one for skinning and slicing, the other for sharpening the main blade.

Their famous war cry, "Ayo Gorkhali" translates as "The Gurkhas are here", their motto, 'Kathar hunnu bhanda marnu ramro' means, 'It is better to die than to be a coward.'

The Gurkhas, as part of the Indian Army, were not eligible to be awarded the Victoria Cross until 1911. Before then the Indian Army's premier award for gallantry was the Indian Order of Merit, an award instituted in 1837. The first Gurkha to be awarded the Victoria Cross was Rifleman Kulbir Thapa of 2nd Battalion 3rd QAO Gurkha Rifles, for conspicuous bravery on the Western Front in 1915.

Credit: The Gurkha Welfare Trust <http://www.gwt.org.uk>

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