

WHO ARE THE GURKHAS?

By N. S. LAWRENCE (late Gurkha Rifles)

THE ROMANCE of the Gurkha fighter has captured the imagination of the New Zealand troops in the Middle East as much as it had captured the imagination and affection of the British Tommy in every war, and in times of peace, ever since the days of the Indian Mutiny.

The Gurkha is generally classed as an Indian. This is incorrect, and no one would resent this classification more than Johnny Gurkha himself. The Gurkha comes from Nepal, an independent kingdom; he possesses a King of his own and a country that is more forbidden to Europeans than the mysterious Thibet.

Within the bounds of Nepal, half of Mount Everest rears its rugged shoulders, the other half is in Thibet. Like the great mountains of his country, the Gurkha takes a broad view of life. During a lengthy service with the Gurkha Rifles and a period as Military Magistrate near the frontiers of Nepal, I have learned to love and respect the Gurkha. He is a simple soul, a good friend, and a relentless enemy.

At the outbreak of the 1914-18 War the Gurkha Regiments numbered ten, of two battalions each, and the heavy casualties they were later to sustain made recruiting very difficult. These difficulties were only magnified; they had always been great. The custom before the Great War had been for each regiment to send trusted Gurkha N.C.O.s into Nepal to exhibit their uniforms, exploit their medals, praise the British Raj (King), and extol their white officers' virtues. No white man accompanied these N.C.O.s—the entrance of Europeans of any kind not being allowed. These recruiters would sometimes be absent many months and return each with a few recruits—hardly sufficient to cover the wastage of pensioners occurring in each unit every year.

There are six fighting castes of Gurkhas—namely, Khas and Thakur, Magar and Gurung, Rai and Limbu. I have stated these in pairs because these pairs are

those who will serve together happily, and consequently the battalions are so comprised.

The rate of recruiting in peace, which was barely sufficient, was totally inadequate to cover the casualties of war. Lord Kitchener (at one time Commander-in-Chief in India) wrote a personal note to the King of Nepal asking special permission for British officers to enter Nepal for recruiting purposes. This request was refused, but the King offered to have a form of conscription in Nepal for the Indian Army. This scheme comprised the conscripting of every second son, it being the custom of the country that the first born son served in the Nepalese Army, a very considerable fighting force. So successful was this conscription that during the Great War 100,000 Gurkhas served in the Indian Army.

In addition to this great conscription scheme the King of Nepal sent 12,000 of his own standing Army, including his own bodyguard, the Khalibahadur Regiment, for garrison duty in India. This contingent saw service in the North-west Frontier and was officered by officers of the Indian Army as well as Nepalese.

Whereas the old-time Gurkha came from the Province of Gurkha in Nepal, these conscripted Sepoys came from other parts of the same country. It was an experience to meet these recruits at Gorghpur near the Nepalese frontier. They had never seen a white face; never seen a railway train; and had never heard any other language except Gurkhali or Nepalese. They were long-haired, unshod, and, apart from a native blanket, unclothed.

The training of the Gurkha recruit is at first a difficult and lengthy process.

The first thing to do is to teach them to walk, not march. So accustomed to hilly climbs are they that they walk in the manner of a man going up or coming down a stairway in the dark, who, when he reaches the top or bottom, treads on a "step that is not there."