

The First Hundred Years: The Gurkhas in Nepal at Delhi & Gallipoli

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A series that examines 3 defining moments in the first hundred years of the Gurkha Rifles that made the regiment what it is today.

Part 1: Nepal.

Pro aris et focis

1815.



Warriors of the Gurkha Federation, c 1815. Note the disciplined way which they hold their muskets, indicating formal linear training.

Two major diplomatic expeditions had been mounted by the British by the time the Gurkha's began encroaching into the Indian protectorates. One in 1767 and the other in 1793, the first failed, the other achieved little for the Gurkha's still mistrusted the British, despite having learned a few lessons about expansionism from them. Nevertheless in 1813 the Gurkha's consistent incursions proved unsupportable to the Marquis of Hastings, who the next year delivered an ultimatum to Nepal demanding that she cede all recently conquered territory back to their original owners. In May the reply came. The Gurkha's swept down from the hills, and wiped out all the British garrisons they found. The East India Company prepared for war with a plan that called for a multi pronged invasion by 4 columns. General Ochterlorny and General Rollo Gillespie would advance from east and west respectively, against the Gurkha commander Amar Singh, hopefully destroying

the main Gurkha field force between them. Meanwhile General Wood would cut off Kathmandu from Palpa and Srinagar, and Major Marley would advance directly upon the capital.

Having received false information that Amar Singh was retreating, Hasting's urged Ochterlorny and Gillespie to hasten the attack. "The bravest and most daring man in the army" was hesitant to move until Ochterlorny came up with his column, and further requested mortars and howitzers which would be useful in the valleys and mountains. On the 20th of October the invasion began, no resistance was encountered until Gillespie arrived at the fort of Nalapani near Kalanga (Kalapani). This was a small hill defence manned by elements of the Magar Purano Gorkha battalion and local recruits.

On October 25 1814 he was ready to commence operations against the fort:



1. "The Bravest man in the British Army"
Rollo Gillespie.

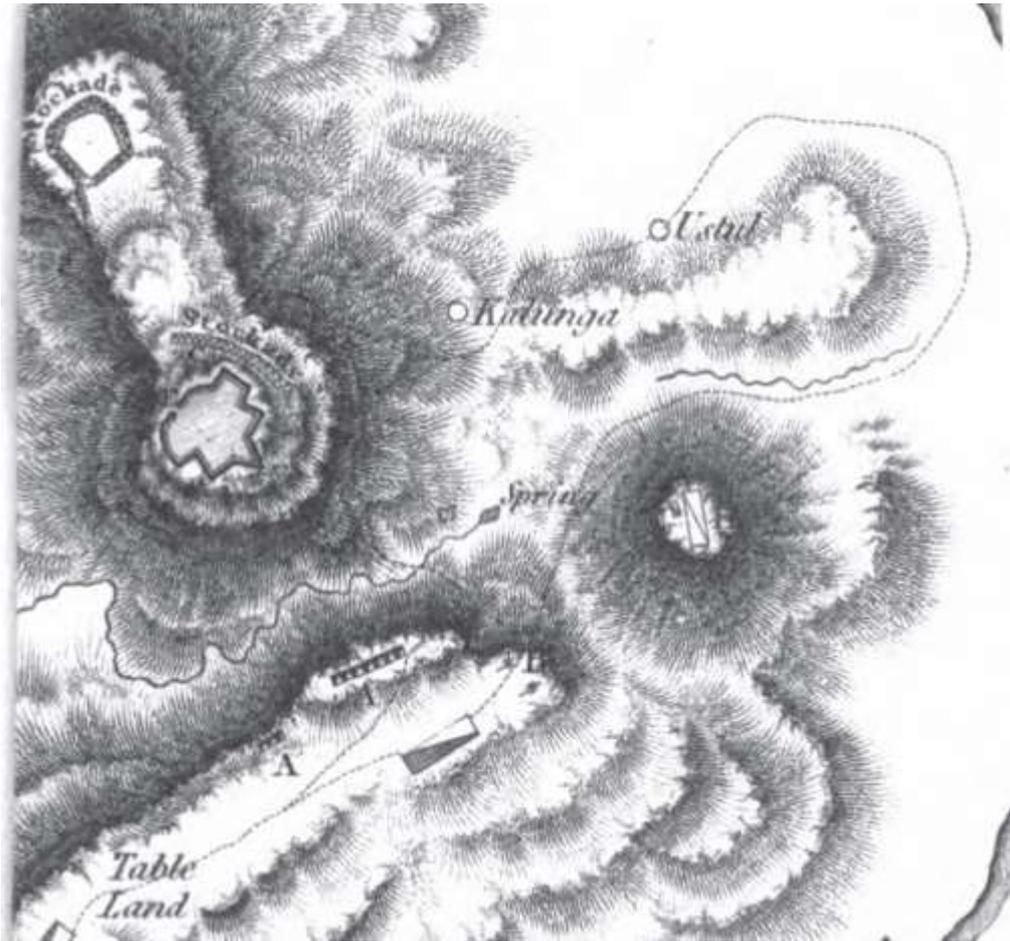
"Here I am," he wrote, "with as stiff and strong a position as ever I saw; garrisoned by men who are fighting pro aris et focus in my front, and who have decidedly the resolution to dispute the fort so long as a man is alive. The fort stands on the summit of an almost inaccessible mountain covered with an impenetrable jungle; the only approaches ... stiffly stockaded. It will be a tough job to take it ... I think I shall have it, sub auspice Deo"

It was now 10:30 and Gillespie arrived in the fortification with three companies of the 53rd Regiment and two 6 pounder guns of the Horse Artillery. His messages to the columns had gone unanswered, and it is implied the bearers never reached their destinations. Gillespie had the guns galloped up to within 25 yards of the walls and opened fire, the gunners working under the attention of the defenders did so with impressive coolness, and under the

cannonade the storming party tried again. This third attack suffered the same fate as the others, they stalled under the fort's musketry and retreated. Gillespie saw that the men were badly shaken and now tried to lead

them forward personally. The General, true to his reputation, brought them on right up to the foot of the walls, alone and mounted out in front, he was a perfect target and as he turned to wave them on he was hit in the heart by a bullet. So died the bravest man in the British army.

“The Bravest man in the British Army” Rollo Gillespie.



The fort at Nalapani near Kalanga, British gun positions are marked on the table land.

Unsurprisingly the attackers now turned back, pursued by the Gurkha's, and it was only the sudden arrival of one of the wayward columns that prevented utter disaster. In all, casualties came to under 225 men. Much of the damage was to the five companies of the 53rd who lost 98 men and the 8th Light Dragoons who lost 5 officers and 58 men. Kalanga would eventually fall, as its garrison, deprived of water, reduced to 70 men, women and children and under constant bombardment, abandoned the fort on the 30th of November. The British entered the fort, which was in “a shocking state” and strewn with dead men, women and children.

This was the first major action of the Anglo-Nepalese war and it was a taste of what was to come. By February all the Company columns except Ochterlorny's, which had no British units in it, had been brought to a halt. The war stretched on, often ingloriously for the British, into 1815, the soldiers doomed to fighting a war that no one cared about outside of Calcutta, and one that was filled with reverse and hardship. However in April an influx of young and intelligent officers turned the tide, and were teaching the Gurkha's that they were indeed fighting a worthy foe. Ochterlorny, had through dint of impossible marches and taking impregnable positions, proved himself from the start the only officer capable of defeating the Nepalese. He brilliantly outmanoeuvred Singh and decisively defeated him at Deothul and things went swiftly downhill for Nepal after that. In May after more stunning defeats emissaries went to Bengal to ask for terms, these proved unacceptable and the war dragged on into 1816, when finally Ochterlorny defeated the Gurkha's again at Makwanpur surrender was inevitable but the British officers were left in a kind of awe of their foes,

indeed the conduct of the war was scattered with instances of good feeling from both sides and very little animosity is apparent. The feelings of the Gurkha's is summed up by the story of an ambush. Lt Frederick Young was leading a detachment of Native irregulars and was taken by surprise, his men were terrified due to the fearsome reputation accrued by the enemy since Kalanga and they scattered, yet he stood his ground. When he was finally made prisoner, the Gurkha's asked him why he did not run with his men, to which Young replied "I didn't come all this way to run away", which so impressed his captors that they all agreed that they could easily serve under a man like this. Little did they know that they would soon get that chance.

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With special thanks to Andrew Duncan for setting me straight about Kathmandu.

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