

## CAPTAIN BHAGTASING PUN MM



Captain Bhagtasing Pun MM who has died aged 101 in Pokhara, Western Nepal was a distinguished Gurkha veteran of the Indian and British Armies. He was born in 1917 into yeoman farming stock in the western village of Ramche in the heart of traditional Gurkha recruiting grounds. Enlisted in 1937 he joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles at Dehra Dun. He first saw operational service in Waziristan in 1938 on India's volatile North West Frontier. Four years later in January 1942 he was part of a reinforcement draft to join his Regiment's Second Battalion in Singapore.

The Second Battalion had fought costly battles against the Japanese in the troubled retreat through Malaya and were now preparing defensive positions on the Island. Within two weeks of Bhagtasing's arrival and without so much as sighting a Japanese his Regiment was ordered to surrender – an order that all ranks found both inexplicable and deeply humiliating. For three and a half years the remnants of the Battalion were to be Prisoners of War of the Japanese. This searing experience, made him determined to get to grips with the enemy when he next went campaigning.

Throughout the Battalion's captivity British and Gurkha ranks were segregated. The British Officers were sent to Changi Barracks – and many subsequently, to the notorious Burma railway. The Gurkhas subject to rigorous treatment from the Japanese and harsh blandishments from the Indian National Army recruiters presented a resolute front in the face of this intimidation. Bhagtasing's group of Gurkhas were held in Nee Soon Camp and he would speak of appalling food and backbreaking coolie work unloading Japanese ships and humping stores and ammunition around the Island in the tropical heat. They stole extra food where they could find it. Abuse and hardship were common. Remarkably, Bhagtasing's health held up for three years until the end of his captivity when he went down with fever and rambled incoherently for days.

Following the Japanese surrender on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1945 the long ordeal for Bhagtasing was over. With his Battalion he travelled back to India by ship and train to Dehra Dun where their arrival was warmly greeted.

In the face of Indian independence in 1947 it had been decided that four of the ten Indian Army Gurkha Regiments would join the British Army in Malaya while the remainder would stay with the Indians. The men in Regiments selected for transfer which included the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkhas were allowed to opt for service with India or travel with their Regiments to Malaya. In the uncertain atmosphere of the time Bhagtasing opted for British service. He arrived back in Singapore with his First Battalion in early 1948.

Bhagtasing was quickly operating against the largely Chinese communist terrorists based in the jungles of Malaya intent on overthrowing the Colonial power. The twelve years of the Malayan Emergency had begun. With others from his Battalion Bhagtasing was seconded to a specialised jungle unit – Ferret Force – to hunt down the terrorists

Bhagtasing soon proved adept at the skills of jungle warfare. Early reports were of a bold and determined leader earning recommendations for awards. He shot and killed his first CT with Ferret Force and a series of successful subsequent engagements established his reputation as a fearless jungle soldier. On 13 July 1951 and by now promoted Sergeant he led an A Company patrol in North Johore, locating a small occupied camp in dense jungle and carried out a successful attack killing one CT and capturing important documents. Then two weeks later as a platoon commander he located a further CT camp and together with rapid reinforcements a two-platoon attack was launched. This resulted in the death of 12 terrorists and the capture of another. The citation for his Military Medal commended Sergeant Bhagtasing for leading his platoon with great gallantry; his skilful use of rifle grenades at the critical moment and the devastating effect of his assault which he pressed home, “with great dash and vigour”. This was one of the most successful operations in the twelve-year Emergency.

In 1953 Colour Sergeant Bhagtasing was selected for the Gurkha contingent to the Queen’s Coronation and while in England for these duties he attended one of Her Majesty’s first investitures to receive his Military Medal. He was to return to UK in 1995 to march on the parade to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VJ day. Throughout the fifties he continued to operate with his Company in the Malayan jungles and was commissioned as a Queen’s Gurkha Officer in 1955. He was promoted to Captain in 1960. His final operational service was to fly with his Battalion to Brunei in 1962 to help put down an insurrection in the State.

Captain Bhagtasing retired in 1964 after 27 years exemplary service. He returned to Ramche to farm his land, carry out village welfare work and look after his family of three daughters and two sons. To improve the educational opportunities for his children he eventually moved to Pokhara buying a modest house close to the British Gurkha camp. His wife, Naumati, died in 1991. His three daughters all married career soldiers in the Nepal, British and Indian Armies. His youngest son Major Bishnu Pun had a successful career in the British Army in his Father’s Regiment. This included service in the Prince of Wales’s household and as a Gurkha Orderly Officer to the Queen. In retirement he now works for the Gurkha Welfare Trust in Salisbury.

Captain Bhagtasing’s longevity and reputation made him the senior veteran of his Regiment much respected by all ranks. His light-hearted and gentle nature belied his courage and tenacity on operations. He was the epitome of a gallant Gurkha soldier.