

BFBS INTERVIEW: GURKHA LEGEND JP CROSS: THE BRITISH ARMY OFFICER WHO TURNED NEPALI

Lieutenant Colonel John Cross OBE has been talking about six decades of luck with the Brigade of Gurkhas in a rare public interview, at the...

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One of the most renowned British Officers in the history of the Brigade of Gurkhas has told how only luck has saved him from death over the years – including the night he escaped from an enemy base decked with human skulls.

Lieutenant Colonel John Cross OBE, otherwise known as JP Cross, spoke in a rare public interview at the age of 94, telling of his service with [Gurkha units for almost 40 years](#), during which time he has stared down death many times. His experience, leadership and devotion to his units helped him earn a legendary respect among the Gurkhas in his adopted home of Nepal, where he is now an official citizen.

He likes to be called a 'Nepali born in Britain', as if to emphasise how immersed he is in the Nepalese way of life.

Lt Col Cross, whose first active service was in the 1944 – 1945 Burma Campaign, told Suman Kharel in an interview with Gurkha Radio BFBS how he once feared for his life during that conflict, after he was briefly held captive by the enemy.

He said his captors taunted him by pointing to 18 skulls hanging from the ceiling at the base, telling him: "Yours will be the 19th tomorrow".



However, that threat never came true because, by morning, he managed to free himself from the confined cell in which he was being held and where he said he had been locked up "sweating with fear", with only a straw mat to sleep on. Seizing an opportunity to slip by the enemy, he then trekked for nine hours through the jungle and eventually used his expert command of soldiering in challenging territory to locate his Gurkha platoon.

Lt Col Cross said that once reunited, his men were extremely pleased to see him but, despite his ordeal, he simply told them: "Let me just have a cup of tea".

He told Forces Radio BFBS that he has never forgotten that cup of tea brewed in a mess tin, saying it was the best of his life.

The retired British officer, who has written 19 books based on his lifelong military experience and knowledge, told Suman of his respect for the Gurkhas. He went on to share his life with these brave soldiers, both as a serving officer and later as a resident of Nepal, for more than six decades and into his retirement.



Lt Col Cross first arrived in Nepal with the British Army 73 years ago at the age of 21. In that time, he has not only become a respected officer but a specialist jungle soldier and counter-insurgency expert who has acted as a police officer, a military attaché, a Gurkha recruitment officer and has gone on to become a renowned author and highly-accomplished linguist with an impressive command of the Nepalese language and dialects.

His active service has included Burma, Indo-China, Malaya and Borneo and he has also served in Pakistan, India, Hong Kong and, of course, Nepal among others. However, it his passion for Nepal, its people and the Gurkhas that has shaped his life – so much so that there came a point in his long years that he decided he never wanted to leave or go back to Britain.

He has not visited the UK for the last 16 years and has no plans to return. It is this devotion to the Nepali way of life, its language and culture, and his military service, that has cemented his name as a legend among the Gurkhas, while his knowledge expressed in his writing has earned him renown in the wider military world. He told Suman that he had been so impressed by the natural beauty of the country that when it came time for him to leave, he had one question in mind: 'Will I ever come back?'

Return he did, and it is the lure of Nepal that has kept him there for much of his life and where he decided to remain long after leaving military service. He has lived as a Nepali to the point of pushing for citizenship, a struggle with the authorities that lasted 32 years, six months and two days before he was granted official Nepali citizen status late into his retirement. Not that his retirement appears to be slowing him down. He is still hard at work as a linguist and a prolific writer, now working on his 20th book in a portfolio that includes titles such as *Jungle Warfare*, *The Call of Nepal*, *It Happens With Gurkhas* and *The Age of Rage*.

He also keeps an active physical fitness regime that would put many half his age to shame, including by walking daily for up to four or five hours in the stunning Nepalese landscape. That is four or five hours, not four or five miles – waking up at 6am and starting his hike at 7.30am. His command of the Nepali language has impressed many Nepalese people, including many who listened as the interview was aired on Gurkha Radio BFBS – a fluency that pays testament to his love of the country and the fact he holds a degree in languages. He even uses several Nepali proverbs that even native speakers say they have rarely heard or use regularly.



Lt Col Cross, fondly remembering his [*association with the First Gurkha Rifles*](#), told how he has also witnessed some major historic milestones during his time as a British officer. He described the key moment in history when he went to sleep in India on 14 August 1947 before waking up in Pakistan the following day on 15 August 1947. Partition had come into effect, dividing British India into two newly-independent countries, India and Pakistan. He said he recalls how, for many days, there was a long queue of refugees, nose to tail, in carts and on foot, for almost 120 miles. The separation based on the new borders created by the British came into effect at midnight, prompting a mass migration in which 15 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs moved to one country or the other in a major upheaval that also sparked tensions, violence, looting and food shortages, with many lives lost in the process.

Out of all his experiences, however, it is the high esteem in which he holds the Gurkhas that stands out most in his mind, especially their fearsome reputation in battle. He says:

*"They attack, defend, patrol and ambush, as instructed.
"The enemy is always scared of the Gurkhas."*

He said that, as commander, he felt proud when the Gurkhas told him: "We are not afraid when you are with us."



JP Cross demonstrates throughout the interview that his memory has not diminished with time or age, and is as sharp as it ever was.

The legendary officer, who has been living in Nepal for 42 years following his retirement, was the first foreigner to be given the right to possess land and a home in Nepal by King Birendra. However, he does not take his long battle to gain official citizenship lightly, and told how his citizenship card is now very close to his heart and that he keeps it with him at all times, saying:

"If I were married, this card would be dearer than my wife."

His home is now firmly in Nepal, where he lives in retirement in Pokhara with his godson and family. He has no plans, however, to take life easy. When he is not walking, he is writing.

His sense of humour is also as sharp as ever: "Call me old when I am 100."

He said he had three wishes to see him through the rest of his days: "Let me not lose my ability to make other people laugh, let me always be together with my Nepali family and one day when I have to leave this world, let that moment be in my sleep."