

# Major Jonathan Titley, exuberant Gurkha officer and founder of a company providing security in world hot-spots – obituary

At Sandhurst he was described as 'something of a rough, tough chap but a useful character to have around if things were not going too well'

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Jonathan Titley at an ANZAC Day Dawn Service at Wellington Arch, London on April 25 2015 CREDIT: Chris Jackson Collection/ Getty Images

Major Jonathan Titley, who has died aged 72, was a Gurkha officer and later became the first to employ retired Gurkhas in private security in the world's hot-spots.

Titley was commissioned into the 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles (6GR) in 1972, and had far-flung postings to Hong Kong and Brunei that suited his rambunctious nature. While he cared deeply for his Gurkha soldiers, he was a highly-professional infantry officer and, attached to 2 Royal Green Jackets, had an operational tour in Ulster.

Off-duty, he often crossed the line at parties and as resident DJ with the officer's mess discotheque would sometimes set fire to his chest hair with a Zippo lighter.

On one occasion, during a further secondment to the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, in 1978, while attending the outback races in Birdsville, Western Queensland, he met the prime minister, Malcolm Fraser in a pub. A party ensued during which Titley and some off-duty Australian soldiers lifted the 6ft 5in PM over the bar to serve the drinks.

On his return his commanding officer wrote: "Titley is a complex character. With a ready answer to any situation, usually expressed in the vernacular of an Australian bushman, his image is not readily identifiable with an officer in the Brigade of Gurkhas."

Jonathan Dale Titley was born in Birmingham on January 1 1951 and spent his early childhood in The Gold Coast (now Ghana) where his father was in the Colonial Service.

After the family returned to Britain, his father joined the Civil Service and Jonathan attended Wallingford Grammar before Sandhurst in 1971, where one of his reports described him as "something of a rough, tough chap but a useful character to have around if things were not going too well".

He eventually left the Army in 1983. Happy to remain in Borneo, he was in Hong Kong to watch the International Rugby Sevens when he met a former brother officer who suggested a streak before kick-off.

As the naked pair approached the halfway line in front of a packed stadium of 25,000 cheering expatriates and suited dignitaries, out marched the pipes and drums of 6GR to play before the match. On recognising Titley, the shocked Pipe Major halted and gave him a smart salute.

"John, are those your chaps down there streaking?" asked the brigadier sitting beside Titley's last Commanding Officer in the Royal Box.

"No, I don't recognise them," sighed Lt Col John Anderson.

"Well, I think they just might be," the Brigadier persisted. "One has just been saluted by your Pipe Major."

Back in Brunei, working in the oil industry services sector, Titley nearly lost his life when, at a fancy dress party at his beachfront home in Kuala Belait, he was stabbed in the chest when he answered the door to a gate crasher from the Black Scorpions, a gang of notorious hoodlums.

Dressed in a wig and a Hawaiian skirt, he rejoined guests clutching his wound, which was spurting blood across the walls. "I've been stabbed. I need to get to hospital," he told his wife, Lyn, calmly. The blade had punctured his lung, missing his aorta by millimetres. Miraculously, he survived.

In 1985 he learnt that a rock-climbing expedition from 14th/20th King's Hussars – 6GR's affiliated regiment – had run out of rations during an attempt on the unclimbed 6,700ft summit of Mt Batu Lawi, deep in the jungle of neighbouring Sarawak.

Pulling on his old jungle kit, he passed himself off as a serving officer and managed to convince the Malaysian air force to make an emergency resupply drop. Finding a seat in the cockpit of a giant Sikorsky helicopter assigned to the task, he directed the mission.

Circling the peak, over dense primary jungle, his pilot assessed a drop too risky. But with one hand on his kukri, Titley grasped the man by the arm, gave him a hard stare and jabbed a finger at the summit. The pilot agreed to attempt one pass.

Titley took the rope fixed to a huge swinging cold box containing the rations, which he gingerly controlled from the open door. As the helicopter almost stalled, he let go - but, slightly miss-timing his release, was almost yanked out as boxes tumbled over the rocks, shedding not only army rations, but ice cream, champagne and cheesecake from his supermarket chiller section. The expedition was saved and the climbers subsequently reached the top.

Titley missed Army life. After two years as a contract officer with the Northern Frontier Force in Oman, he and Lyn spent the next six in Kathmandu, Nepal, where he drove a Russian military motorbike combination, kept two sheep named "Lunch" and "Dinner" and launched his Gurkha security business.

He also played in the World Elephant Polo Championships held at Tiger Tops in the Chitwan National Park. His team - the "Haithi Satis" ("Friends of the Elephants") - lost in the 1994 final to a team of park rangers.

Titley's company won major contracts with governments and the UN. In Kuwait his teams cleared mines and unexploded ordnance in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1992. During the Mozambique Civil War the same year, they guarded installations and cleared mines from roads during fighting between the ruling left-wing party (Frelimo) and right-wing militants (Renamo).

Further contracts followed in Angola and Sierra Leone, but after irreconcilable differences with his co-directors, Titley left the business and returned to the UK. The strain affected his marriage he and Lyn subsequently separated and divorced.

He spent his retirement living first in Clapham, enjoying lectures at the Royal Geographical Society, where he was a fellow. There were further spells in South Africa, Malta and Kosovo before he settled at Westbury, Wiltshire, where he watched re-runs of Zulu and drove a brightly-painted tuk-tuk.

He never forgot the Gurkhas, and on the 175th anniversary of the founding of his old regiment, he flew to Brunei for a ceremony attended by [Tul Bahadar Pun](#), a surviving Victoria Cross holder. Six years ago, he was back in Pokhara, West Nepal, for the 200th anniversary and was spotted outside a bar telling stories to passing tourists. Jonathan Titley married, in 1976, Lyn Fairbrother. Although the marriage was dissolved they remarried last December. He is survived by her and by two daughters.

**Major Jonathan Titley, born January 1 1951, died January 3 2023**