

Colonel Denis Wood

Officer who served with the Gurkhas in Malaya and Borneo and later preserved their legacy as a meticulous regimental historian

In August 1944, on reaching 17, Denis Wood volunteered for the army. He was "padded" for administrative convenience to the Queen's Royal Regiment, the senior English infantry regiment of the line, and placed in the Territorial Army Reserve until he was old enough for regular service at 17 and a half.

At this stage of the war, with the Allies pushing into Belgium, the expectation was that the fighting in Europe would be over in six to nine months. Priority in officer recruiting was shifting to the Far East; the planners expecting the fighting to continue there into 1946 and perhaps beyond. After attending an India Office selection board, Wood was offered a cadetship in the Indian Army (IA) — the army of British India.

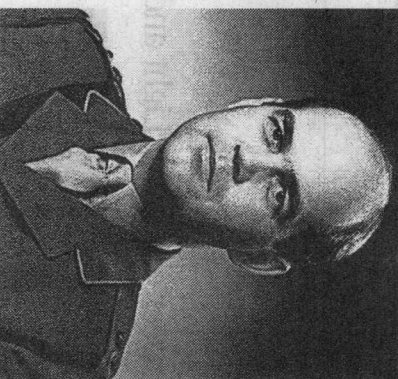
In March 1945 he duly reported to No 63 Primary Training Wing at Victoria Barracks in Maidstone, Kent, joining the IA holding company. After an arm injury set him back two months, in October he embarked for India and the Bangalore Officer Training School. En route from Bombay he met an officer of the 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (The Sirmoor Rifles) at a railway station. He was impressed and applied to join them, a seemingly haphazard method of officer recruiting, but as good as any in an army expanding from its prewar establishment of 200,000 to a planned figure of 2.5 million.

Such was the need, however, that Wood was at once attached to the Sirmoor's first battalion (1/2GR) as a company officer, initially in Bombay and then Poona in the Deccan. His brief encounter at the station would prove doubly fortunate. After independence and the partition of India in August 1947, the ten regiments of Gurkhas, swollen to 40 battalions during the war, had to be divided between the British Army and the army of newly independent India. 2GR was one of the four regiments (each of two battalions) to join the British establishment. This therefore gave Wood an extension of service, whereas those in regiments allocated to India had to find a billet elsewhere. Wood was posted as assistant recruiting officer to Kumraghat and Darjeeling, near the border with Nepal, where he was able to polish his Gurkham, praised years later as the best in 2GR. In 1949, he rejoined 1/2GR in Malaya as the communist insurgency erupted.

His time as a temporary officer was

He applied to join the Gurkhas after meeting an officer at the station

coming to an end, however, and there was no vacancy for a regular commission in 2GR. Instead, he was attached for a few months to a Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) transport company in Perak State, Malaya, before returning to England to attend the RASC regular officers' course. After 1/2GR, it must have seemed a consider-



Wood signed up for the army aged 17

able comedown. Yet no sooner had he begun the course than a vacancy arose in his former battalion. He immediately rejoined them, in Johor State, Malaya, and shortly afterwards became adjutant, for which in 1953 he was mentioned in dispatches, an unusual accolade for a regimental staff officer.

Over the next two years during the Malayan Emergency he commanded two rifle companies and the administrative company, surviving a helicopter crash on a jungle reconnaissance, all before he was 28, early command being one of the attractions of Gurkha service. Denis Roland Wood was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1927, where his father, Roland, was serving at the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers' depot. He was educated first at nearby Dame Alannis School, before boarding at St Anne's, Windermere, unusually for the time a mixed school. In 1953 he married

Bridget Christina (Chris) Flynn, whom he had first met in Singapore where she was a nursing sister in Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps. She died in 2011. Their daughter, Carolyn, survives him.

Wood was not much taller than his Gurkhas, compact of build and no athlete, but his intellectual powers were formidable nevertheless, and his attention to detail meticulous. He passed the entrance examination to the staff college at Camberley with evident ease. An appointment on the intelligence staff at the War Office followed. In 1964 he returned to 1/2GR in Hong Kong as second-in-command, deploying with them on three six-month operational tours in Borneo during the Confrontation, the Indonesian president Sukarno's campaign to break up the new federation of Malaysia.

Wood then returned to the staff college to teach, before in 1968 assuming command of 1/2GR in Brunei. As a deterrence force against any further attempts to depose the sultan, it was crucial to British interests, but Brunei was not a place for a commanding officer to shine.

After his two years there, Wood joined Far East Command headquarters in Singapore as chief of the operations and plans staff. It was a demanding job, not least because of the withdrawal of British forces from Singapore in 1971.

A further teaching job followed, at the then Joint Services Staff College, and then promotion to full colonel on the defence intelligence staff in Whitehall. Even though his responsibilities

covered the Far East, the job did not please him, though hardly surprisingly as Britain had withdrawn from east of Suez, except Hong Kong whose time was approaching too. In October 1973 he retired from the army to work for a life insurance and pensions company, and bought a house in Islington.

He at once turned his love of Gurkha history, his formidable organisational skills and his personal wealth to the project that stands in part as his memoir, as well as to his co-collaborator and fellow "Sirmoor" Field Marshal Sir John Chapple (obituary, March 26, 2022) — the Gurkha Museum in the former Peninsula Barracks, Winchester, now an upmarket residential square but still the spiritual home of rifle regiments. He was chairman of the trustees from 1978 to 2003, for which he was latterly appointed MBE.

Having earlier published a study of the insignia of his father's old regiment, in 2003 he published the fourth volume of the history of 2GR, covering the postwar years. A tireless and assiduous historian of regimental arcana, he had also compiled a compendium of the service details of 1,447 Sirmoor officers who had served since the regiment's raising in 1815.

It was ironic that his own early service had been in the fighting to preserve empire, and the rest of it in empire's long, withdrawing roar. He was one of the last surviving British Indian Army officers.

Colonel Denis Wood MBE, Gurkha officer, was born on August 19, 1927. He died on June 22, 2026, aged 98.