

50th Indian Parachute Brigade and the 2nd Goorkhas

By Nick Hinton¹

The review of David Allison's book about the battle of Sangshak² in the August 2026 edition of 'The Bulletin' reminded me of the close connection between 50th Indian Parachute Brigade, which fought the Japanese there, and my Regiment, 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles (known colloquially as the '2nd Goorkhas').

Airborne troops have always had to rely for much of their fighting power on the determination, energy and zeal of their officers and men. These qualities were admirably illustrated by the 2nd Goorkhas who volunteered to serve in the new Brigade.



Brigadier William Gough

Brigadier William ('Bill') Gough MC, late 2nd Goorkhas, was the Brigade's first Commander. He was described in his Regimental obituary as 'one of the most aggressive and dynamic officers of the Regiment.....a forward thinker who foresaw the possibilities of specialist training'³. He was also a man of rumbunctious good humour remembered fondly as the life and soul of many riotous parties. These visionary and extrovert qualities made him an inspirational leader of energy and strong character well-suited to setting up and commanding the Indian Army's first airborne formation.

Gough started his service with the 1st Battalion. In Mesopotamia he won his MC in the 1915 assault on the Dujailah Redoubt, later in the same campaign sustaining 27 shrapnel wounds, breaking an arm and a leg and losing an eye. He subsequently took part in the 1918 Marri Expedition and the Third Afghan War as well as undertaking several tours of duty in Waziristan on the North-West Frontier, for one of which he was mentioned in despatches.

On completing his tour in command of the Second Battalion of the 2nd Goorkhas in November 1940 he volunteered to become a parachutist. He qualified in the UK despite breaking a leg on his final jump, returning to India to take command of the Brigade when it was formed in October 1941.

Gough later wrote about how he got involved in airborne warfare⁴:

'It was as long ago as 1927 that I first thought of the possibilities of paratroops. I can still remember the reception of my idea when I propounded it one evening in the mess. Possibly the first concrete thought of using the men of the Regiment in such a capacity came from [then Major Freddie] Loftus-Tottenham when he suggested to me at Damdil [on the North-West Frontier] in April 1940 that the Second Battalion of the 2nd Goorkhas should volunteer *en bloc* for this duty. At that time I hesitated because I did not think that the time was ripe; but by September, when Loftus had gone to command a battalion of the 10th Gurkhas and had brought them up to Razmak, things had altered. I found that his initiative and enterprise had caused both battalions of the 10th to volunteer for this duty. At this time I went on leave to Simla. There Gertie Toker⁵ got hold of me and asked me if I would like to raise

¹ The author is most grateful to his colleague John Harrop, who checked and confirmed many items of detail in this article. We also co-authored a 2025 one-volume history of the 2nd Goorkhas, 'Remarkable Times, Remarkable Men'.

² 'Fight Your Way Out' by David Allison, Pen and Sword, 2023.

³ Obituary, 2nd KEO Gurkha Rifles Regimental News 1948.

⁴ Regimental History of 2nd King Edward VII's Own Gurkha Rifles, Volume III, pps.287-8.

⁵ Toker, an officer of the 2nd Goorkhas, was then a Colonel holding the post of Deputy Director of Training at GHQ India, but was a radical military thinker with considerable influence over force development in the Indian Army. He

the first paratroops in India. On my return to Razmak I put the proposition to the Second Battalion with the result that the whole unit volunteered.'

GHQ India did not allow the entire Second Battalion to follow Gough into the new Brigade but he was evidently given a great deal of freedom to select who joined him:

'When I started raising the paratroops I came to the conclusion that I could never do better than make as large a selection as possible from the 2nd Goorkhas. My first volunteer was Ormsby⁶, but as luck would have it he was sent elsewhere. Then came Major Martin Lindsay of the Royal Scots Fusiliers, whose father had been in the 2nd Goorkhas and who already was a trained and experienced paratrooper. The next was Freddie Loftus-Tottenham, whom I was extremely glad to get as an experienced commanding officer – extremely tough (not to say forceful) and whom I wanted as my second-in-command. Other volunteers from the Regiment then came in apace. There was Maurice Newsome⁷, who became an instructor at the Air Landing School, and Harry Butchard⁸ of the First Battalion who became Adjutant of 153 Battalion. Subedar [Captain] Lalbahadur Gurung of the First Battalion became 153 Battalion's first Subedar-Major [senior Gurkha officer] but unfortunately, because of previously unspotted ear trouble the doctors would never allow him to jump. I cannot enumerate all our Regimental volunteers. Prominent among them was Havildar [Sergeant] (later Jemadar [Lieutenant]) Narbahadur Thapa IDSM⁹ who got his decoration in 1942 for extremely good work with the paratroops dropped in Burma in 1942¹⁰, the first paratroop force ever to be sent out of India. Finally there was Hugh Parsons, who was always air-minded and who left a staff job at New Delhi to command Third Battalion of the 7th Gurkhas who were taken *en bloc* as paratroops. He had cruel bad luck in breaking an ankle on his first jump.'¹¹



Subedar-Major
Lalbahadur Gurung

However, Gurkhas were motivated to join the Parachute Brigade by more tangible factors than Regimental loyalty and respect for the leadership of their British Officers. Rifleman Dalbahadur Khatri of the 9th Gurkha Rifles later said:

'We went to 154 Parachute Battalion in Rawalpindi for 10 days' training which included seven day jumps and one night jump. We were given our 'butterfly' wings. After we had passed out we were given an extra 50 Rupees [a month] and that, with our 16 Rupees pay made us really rich. Everybody envied us.'¹²

This quadrupling of the Gurkhas' pay must have been another significant incentive to volunteer as a parachutist.

The Brigade initially consisted of three parachute battalions: 151 made up of British troops; 152 comprising Indian soldiers, and 153 consisting of Gurkhas. 151 Battalion was later redesignated 156 Battalion and in

commanded 4th Indian Division with distinction later in the war in North Africa and Italy, and retired as Lieutenant General Sir Francis Tuker KCIE CB DSO OBE.

⁶ Captain 'Monty' Ormsby who won a MC with the 1st Battalion in Italy, another in 1950 in Malaya. As a Lieutenant Colonel he commanded the 1st Battalion 1958-60 and was awarded a MBE in 1981 for his work as a Retired Officer.

⁷ Lieutenant, later Temporary Captain Maurice Newsome. He commanded the Indian Wing of the Parachute Landing School at Willingdon Airfield, Delhi. He was killed in a traffic accident at Murree in August 1943.

⁸ Captain, later Major Harry Butchard served with the 2nd Goorkhas until 1949 and subsequently from 1952-58.

⁹ Indian Distinguished Service Medal, equivalent to the Military Medal or Military Cross.

¹⁰ See the account of 'Operation Puddle' later in this article.

¹¹ Captain EHM Parsons. He later returned to active service as a Lieutenant Colonel to command the 4th Battalion of the 2nd Goorkhas from October 1943 to September 1944, earning a DSO.

¹² 'Gurkhas at War: Eyewitness Accounts from World War II to Iraq' by JP Cross, Frontline Books 2015, p.161.

October 1942 was moved to another airborne formation in the Middle East. To replace it, 154 Battalion was raised from another levy of Gurkhas – mostly from the Third Battalion of the 7th Gurkha Rifles – starting in December that year.

Although only a few small parts of his Brigade deployed piecemeal on operations while he was in command, Gough achieved a great deal just by assembling and organising the formation. He also succeeded in training them in spite of considerable limitations of material and skills. To begin with the Brigade was assigned only two aircraft, venerable Vickers Valentias whose design dated back to 1922. Even these were taken away in early 1942 to ferry refugees out of Burma, and on return became non-operational because of storm damage. It was not until much later that year that a few more modern aircraft became available.



A Vickers Valentia

Parachutes too were in short supply. For several months only 14 were available, brought out from England by the parachute instructors, which did not go far among the 2500 men who needed to learn to parachute. It was not until well into 1942 that the quality of locally-made parachutes was deemed adequate and significant numbers started to become available. Training was dangerous and unpredictable. In the first training jump carried out, three officers were dropped on a tarmac runway in Karachi and were badly injured, the Brigade Major breaking his back¹³. The first drop of a 'stick' of parachutists in February 1942 was also less than successful: one man was killed and another seriously injured. The volunteers were resilient in the face of these setbacks. In one incident a Valentia full of Gurkhas crashed on the runway during take-off. Nobody was hurt. The Gurkhas de-planed, marched down the runway and promptly got into another plane to complete their first experience of flying in an aircraft¹⁴. On another occasion Rifleman Ranbahadur Thapa got caught up on the tail of an aircraft: 'It was only after the aeroplane had gone round three times that the crew realised there was a man outside. He was hanging for quite some time before they managed to pull him in. He was excused dropping [sent back to his Regimental Centre] and later went back home with a pension'.¹⁵ Eric Neild, the Medical Officer of 153 Battalion, later stated that 'fatalities occurred on nearly every [training] course, so that with a hundred men on each it represented a mortality of nearly one percent of would-be jumpers'.¹⁶

Gough handed over the Brigade in September 1942. In the thinking of the time some considered him, at 43, too old to lead an airborne brigade in battle, and the compound fracture of his leg had still not fully healed.

¹³ Major Paul 'Hoppy' Hopkinson of the 2nd Punjab Regiment spent some time in a plaster cast, but later returned to active duty and as a Lieutenant Colonel commanded 152 Battalion at the battle of Sangshak in March 1944. He later wrote an account of the battle: see <https://robertlyman.substack.com/p/commanding-an-indian-parachute-battalion>.

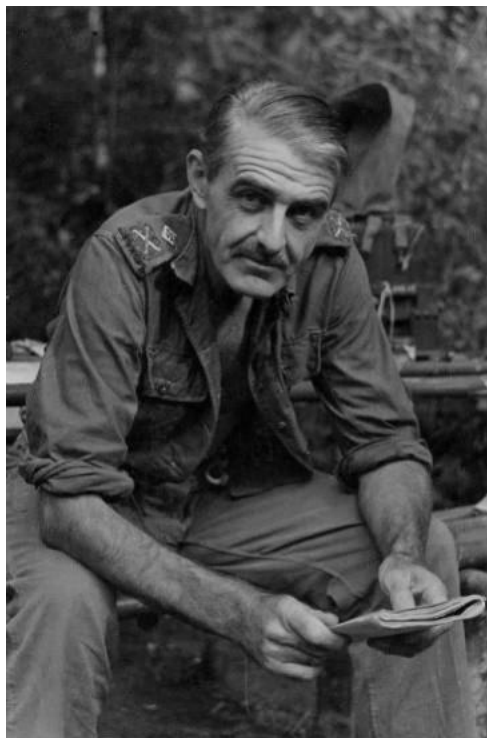
¹⁴ Airborne Museum archives.

¹⁵ JP Cross, op.cit., p.162.

¹⁶ "With Pegasus in India: the story of 153 Gurkha Parachute Battalion' by E Neild, reprinted by Nashville Press 1990, p.35.

His successor, Brigadier Maxwell Julian Hope-Thompson was, at 31, one of the youngest brigade commanders in the Army. Competent and athletic but somewhat reserved, he was described as 'a total contrast to his gregarious and extrovert predecessor'¹⁷. Gough subsequently commanded Columbo Brigade Area and Jhelum Sub Area. He retired from the Army in 1947 and was killed in an air crash in South Africa in May 1948.

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Freddie Loftus-Tottenham in 1944 when commanding 81st West African Division

153 Battalion was raised and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Freddie Loftus Tottenham (later Major General, CBE, DSO and bar). He had joined the 2nd Goorkhas in 1916 and, like Gough, served with them in Mesopotamia, where he had been accidentally shot by a British sentry when returning from a patrol. Much of his inter-war career was spent away from the Regiment and included being Training Officer for the Resident's Escort in Kathmandu and Commandant of the Udaipur Indian State Forces, the Regimental History noting that this was 'an independent command with many opportunities for field sports which he much enjoyed'. He was briefly Second-in-Command of the Second Battalion before commanding the First Battalion 10th Gurkha Rifles at Razmak on the North-West Frontier from June 1940 to December 1941. He then commanded 153 Battalion until mid-1942. He was described as 'extremely fit with boundless energy and a somewhat alarming disregard for his personal safety....a fine-looking man with a forceful personality, he had a delightful sense of humour and was a great deflator of the bogus and pompous....as a fighting man he was shrewd and possessed a fine tactical sense. He was in no way brilliant but he was brave and dashing....a bulldog of a man, tenacious and stubborn, a leader who led by example, excelled in man management and was forthright but fair'.¹⁸

Although he never commanded 153 Battalion in action, he gave it 'form and substance, and above all a unique self-confidence and character that would remain with it until disbandment at the end of the war'¹⁹. After the war Loftus-Tottenham wrote a brief reminiscence of his time in command which was published in both the 2nd Goorkhas' and the 10th Gurkha Rifles Journals²⁰. Admitting that he was not a 'literary gent' and had not kept a diary, his account makes it clear that his main task was to gather the necessary manpower and to organise and train them in the face of 'shortage, or complete lack, of everything essential in India. Indents, whether for clerical personnel or vital equipment, invariably came back marked 'not available'.

He recalled Bill Gough's attempts to rally enthusiasm and support for his formation and airborne warfare in general:

'He seemed to miss the fact that, with one eye and one leg, he was scarcely a good advertisement for the art; added to which his Brigade Major was in plaster of Paris with a broken back having been chucked out of an aeroplane on to the asphalt at Karachi [see Footnote 13]. However, Bill's tremendous guts, personality and charm were sufficient to overcome such minor snags, and I never heard anyone who mattered being put off by his battered appearance; in fact it encouraged the good chaps whilst discouraging the faint-hearted, which is just what was wanted'.

¹⁷ Seaman op cit, p.15.

¹⁸ Obituary in 'The Sirmooree', June 1987.

¹⁹ 'The Battle at Sangshak: Prelude to Kohima' by Harry Seaman p.16.

²⁰ 'The Bugle and Kukri' Volume 2 Number 3, December 1952, a copy of which was kindly provided by David Harding, late 10th Gurkha Rifles. Loftus-Tottenham had previously published a very similar article in the 1951 Journal of the 2nd Goorkhas.

Besides organisation and administration, Loftus-Tottenham was responsible for getting his men trained as parachutists:

‘No Gurkha or Indian had ever yet jumped and there was a certain amount of apprehension as to how they would react. We need not have worried. The first Indian to jump was the Madrassi Medical Officer of the Indian battalion, and the first Gurkha was a young Havildar Major of the 1st/10th [Gurkha Rifles] who later went on the instructional staff.’

‘There were at the time less than 20 parachutes for the whole Brigade, which meant constant repacking. However, the whole Battalion piled through without a single refusal or serious accident – these were to come later when parachutes were more plentiful and packing consequently less carefully done. The planes were of a distinctly ancient brew....in fact they looked, and felt, so ancient that some chaps said it was a distinct relief to jump out of them.’

Loftus-Tottenham subsequently attended the Higher War School and, as a Colonel, commanded the Fortress at Vizagapatam on the east coast of India, for which he was mentioned in despatches. From February 1943 he commanded 33 Indian Infantry Brigade in fiercely-fought operations in the Arakan and, from April 1944, at Kohima for which he was awarded his first DSO. Promoted Acting Major General in August 1944 he was given command of 81st West African Division and was awarded a second DSO for their successful attack on the town of Myohaung in the Arakan in January 1945. During this time two of his three sons were killed, both aged 20: Ralph in 1944 while serving with First Battalion 2nd Goorkhas in Italy, and John in 1945 with Third Battalion 6th Gurkha Rifles in Burma.

After Indian independence Loftus-Tottenham commanded 7th Division and Rawalpindi District in the newly-formed Pakistan Army. His opposite number on the Indian side was Major General ‘Os’ Lovett CB CBE DSO and bar, another 2nd Goorkha. Regimental lore has it that they used to meet regularly on the border to agree how their two opposing commands should interact, Loftus-Tottenham arriving in his jeep and Lovett in his privately-owned white Rolls Royce that he insisted on using as a staff car.

His final appointment, in 1946-7, was as General Officer Commanding Force 401 in Iraq, a brigade-sized group formed to protect British oil interests. At the end of his tour he was made CBE. In retirement he served with the Home Guard in Northern Ireland, later becoming Organizing Secretary of the Cancer Campaign in Northern Ireland and a Regional Organizer of the Army Benevolent Fund.

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*Company Havildar Major Bhimbahadur Thapa,
by Harry Sheldon*

There is little testimony or record of the many Gurkhas from the Regiment who served with 50th Indian Parachute Brigade but we are fortunate that a fine portrait survives of Company Havildar [Sergeant] Major Bhimbahadur Thapa. It was painted by Harry Sheldon, a war artist whose work was reviewed in an article by Denis Wood in the February 2021 edition of The Bulletin.

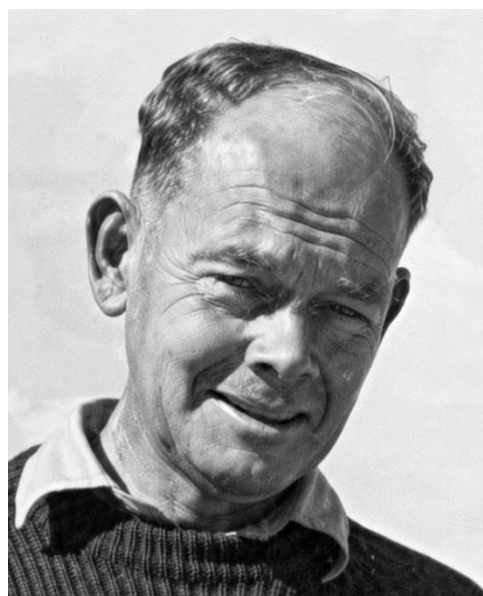
Bhimbahadur was born in 1917 and enlisted in the 6th Gurkha Rifles in 1934, serving pre-war in India and on active service on the North-West Frontier. During the Second World War he was a PT Instructor, first at an Officers’ Training School and then at the Indian Parachute School where he qualified as a parachutist. He did not see active service during the War, but was commissioned as a Jemadar [Lieutenant] in the 6th Gurkha Rifles in 1945, later being promoted Subedar [Captain] and, after Indian Independence, becoming a Captain (King’s Gurkha Officer). In 1951 he was awarded a Commander-in-Chief’s certificate for good service in the Malaya campaign and the same year became a

Gurkha Commissioned Officer²¹ in the 2nd Goorkhas. He was initially Second-in-Command of Support Company of the 1st Battalion but soon became the Company Commander. In 1953 he was mentioned in despatches for his continuing good work in the Malayan campaign. He later commanded B Company and D Company before retiring from the Army in 1963 as a Major. His son, Bhagwansing Thapa, went to an English school and after attending the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst served during the 1970s and 80s as an officer in the 6th Gurkha Rifles.

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Gough, Loftus-Tottenham and Bhimbahadur Thapa were key players in the formation of 50th Indian Parachute Brigade but did not have the opportunity to lead it in action. One 2nd Goorkha who took part in all its warfighting operations was Jimmy Roberts, described in his obituary by the late Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, who had served with him in the 2nd Goorkhas, as 'a man of charm and ability, kindly and generous, honest and outspoken, shy, modest, brave and tough'.²²

Commissioned into the 1st King George V's Own Gurkha Rifles in 1937, Roberts forged a pre-war reputation as an intrepid mountaineer. He climbed several peaks in the Himalayas and was selected for the abortive 1939 and 1940 attempts to climb Mount Everest. He served briefly with his Regiment in North Africa before joining 153 Battalion shortly after it was formed. He was privileged to lead the first significant military operation the Brigade undertook, 'Operation Puddle'. On 3rd July 1942 seven Gurkha and four British parachutists from 153 Battalion, led by Roberts, were dropped into Myitkina in Burma to collect intelligence, which they did successfully. They then marched 150 miles back to Fort Hertz, helping to establish an airfield there before being extracted on 20th August. He published a detailed account of the operation in the 2nd Goorkhas Journal of 1952. It was a gruelling mission during which they were often short of food and water and reliant on uncertain support from the local people both for sustenance and for information about the enemy. Roberts was awarded an MC and his radio operator, Jemadar [*Lieutenant*] Narbahadur Thapa, also of the 2nd Goorkhas, was awarded the IDSM.



Jimmy Roberts

Roberts took part in the battle of Sangshak, in March 1944, as Officer Commanding A Company of 153 Battalion. 154 Battalion was not yet fully trained and had been left behind, but 152 and 153 Battalions had been deployed – by rail and road, not air – to carry out routine patrols in what was thought to be a quiet sector. The Brigade was reinforced by the Fourth Battalion 5th Mahratta Light Infantry and two companies of Nepalese soldiers from the Kalibahadur Regiment²³ who already occupied the Sangshak position. However, the unexpected advance of three Japanese divisions plunged the two battalions into a full-scale running battle in which they incurred 652 casualties while inflicting similar damage on the enemy. When the Sangshak position was no longer tenable they exfiltrated to Imphal and thence to Secunderabad from where, reunited with a now viable 154 Battalion, the whole Brigade withdrew to reform and retrain in Rawalpindi. Roberts and his men fought well, as a report of the battle in the Kohima Museum²⁴ indicates:

²¹ 'Gurkha Commissioned Officer' was a rank of Captain or Major given to exceptionally able Gurkha officers. It made them eligible to hold the same appointments as British Officers, such as commanding companies. They became members of the British Officers' Mess and were entitled to significantly better pay and allowances than Viceroy Commissioned Officers (who after Indian independence were known as King's and later Queen's Gurkha Officers).

²² Obituary in the Himalayan Journal 58, 1998.

²³ Infantry and engineers from the Royal Nepalese Army fought alongside the British in Burma.

²⁴ <https://www.kohimamuseum.co.uk/the-battle-of-sangshak/>

‘Hope-Thomson [the Brigade Commander] ordered another counter-attack, this time from A Company of 153 Battalion, led by Major Jimmy Roberts. The ground they needed to recover was too close to use mortars or artillery, so the Gurkhas gathered all the grenades they could find. Roberts moved among his men, calm & oblivious to danger, inspiring them by his nonchalance.’

The Sangshak battle is generally seen as a tactical failure because of the severe casualties incurred by the Brigade and loss of a key position²⁵, but it was a strategic success because it delayed the enemy advance on Kohima and Imphal by a week, enabling the XIV Army to be reinforced and subsequently win those critical battles. This was recognised by Lieutenant General Bill Slim, commanding the XIV Army, who sent the following message:

‘To the officers & men of the 50 Parachute Brigade I send my congratulations. Your Parachute Brigade bore the first brunt of the enemy’s powerful flanking attack, & by their staunchness gave the garrison of Imphal the vital time required to readjust their defences.’²⁶

Roberts also took part in the Brigade’s final wartime operation, an airborne assault on Rangoon on 1st May 1945. By this time the original battalions had become part of the Indian Parachute Regiment²⁷. Not anticipating the requirement for an airborne operation most of the Brigade had been sent on leave, but enough Gurkha parachutists were found to form a composite battalion of four companies. As a precursor to landings from the sea they were dropped from Dakota aircraft and in the face of some Japanese opposition captured Elephant Point at the mouth of the Rangoon River, incurring 41 casualties. In 1946 Roberts was mentioned in despatches for his work in Burma during 1944 & 1945.

On the partition of India in 1947 four Gurkha regiments transferred to the British Army and the remainder, including Roberts’ parent Regiment, stayed in the Indian Army. Wanting to continue his career as a soldier, Roberts opted to transfer to the 2nd Goorkhas. As a company commander he was awarded the MBE for his achievements during the Malaya campaign and was again mentioned in despatches. He continued his climbing exploits and was shortlisted, but not selected, to lead the 1953 expedition to climb Mount Everest, which turned out to be the first successful attempt to do so. His final post was as British Defence Attaché in Kathmandu. He was appointed MVO 4th Class for organising the Queen’s visit to Nepal in 1961 (later converted to LVO) as well as receiving the Nepalese Order of Gorkha Dakshin Bahu 3rd Class. He retired from the Army in 1962 as an Honorary Lieutenant Colonel and set up and ran a pheasant and wildfowl business in Nepal. He was also one of the first to organise treks there, and is still regarded as the ‘father of trekking’ by many Nepalese.

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During the war the Brigade undertook a few other tasks, but none of the same significance as those Roberts was involved in. In July 1942 troops from A Company 152 Battalion were dropped from Valentias near the Nara river, about 150 miles north-east of Karachi, to try and curb the actions of Hur tribesmen who had been ransacking local villages near Hyderabad. The Hurs had learned of the plan in advance and were able

²⁵ 152 Battalion incurred 85-90% casualties, 153 Battalion about 30%. The Brigade Commander had a nervous breakdown during the battle and was removed from his command shortly after it ended.

²⁶ The commander of IV Corps, of which 50th Indian Parachute Brigade was a part during the Sangshak battle, also congratulated them on their achievement. He was Lieutenant General Geoffrey Scoones, another 2nd Goorkha, who had served with the 2nd Battalion in France 1914-15 where he earned a DSO and a MC and was mentioned three times in despatches. He later commanded the Second Battalion of the 8th Gurkha Rifles. After the successful battles of Kohima and Imphal he was knighted and promoted to full General, taking over Central Command in India. From 1953-57 he was the British High Commissioner to New Zealand.

²⁷ The Indian Parachute Regiment was formed on 18th December 1944. 152 Battalion was split to create a Hindu 1st Battalion and Muslim 4th Battalion and the Gurkhas of 153 and 154 Battalions were reorganised to become the 2nd and 3rd Battalions. From then on all wore Parachute Regiment cap badges. It was disbanded by October 1946 but reformed in 1952.

to avoid all contact with the parachutists, highlighting the need for much better operational security. In August 1942 all three Battalions were used in a civil policing role in Delhi to help suppress the 'Quit India' movement. After independence the Brigade transferred to the Indian Army and subsequently fought bravely and effectively in successive Indo-Pakistan wars. It also took part in the liberation of Goa in 1961 and the 1988 suppression of a coup in the Maldives. It remains an elite and highly-regarded part of the Indian Army although it now no longer includes Gurkha troops.

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The wartime history of 50th Indian Parachute Brigade points to it being something of a Cinderella formation, under-resourced and lacking opportunities to demonstrate its true potential. Eric Neild, the Medical Officer of 153 Battalion, later commented 'How much more satisfying an end to four years of air-training would it have been to justify the time, money and enthusiasm expended by completing just one formation drop on operations before the clock struck twelve'.²⁸

The lack of resources is understandable and was to some extent inevitable given severe wartime shortages, but the Brigade's underuse derived from misguided boosterism about the sustainability and utility of such a force in the kind of war being fought against the Japanese in the jungles of Burma. The French, fighting in a similar environment in Vietnam in the early 1950s, used parachute forces effectively to achieve rapid deployments and surprise, but unlike the wartime 50th Indian Parachute Brigade they had access to plenty of aircraft and parachutes. However, the catastrophic French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 exposed the significant limitations of a largely airborne force, resupplied by air, in sustained operations against highly-motivated and well-equipped conventional troops. 50th Indian Parachute Brigade laboured under the same constraints and more during the Second World War.

Such musings by armchair generals and amateur historians aside, we should applaud Gough, Loftus-Tottenham, Bhimbahadur Thapa, Roberts and their colleagues for their enthusiasm and energy in implementing a new, untried concept in the face of so many challenges. They created a formation with warfighting capability as the battle of Sangshak, the capture of Elephant Point and other smaller-scale operations demonstrated. They also established a Gurkha association with the airborne tradition that has endured to the present day through strong links with the Gurkha Independent Parachute Company, 5 Airborne Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade. Whatever reservations there may be about the utility of airborne forces in modern warfare, there is no doubt that they add an inspirational and aspirational dimension – not to mention a touch of glamour – to the military service of many young men, a worthwhile and enduring legacy that in the case of Gurkhas originated with the remarkable men who were our illustrious predecessors.

²⁸ E Neild, op.cit. p.101.