

Sir John Nott

'Here Today Gone Tomorrow'

Autobiography published 2002

Extract covering his military service 1952-56

Around 150,000 eighteen-year-olds were conscripted every year into the armed forces right up until 1960. No-one who went through this experience will ever forget it. British male society today is divided into those who have experienced military service and those who have not. It remains a cultural divide of some significance.

National Service, as it was called, probably did more good than harm to the youth of Britain, but some succumbed to temptation. Everything in military life is a mixture of intense activity, occasional excitement and prolonged periods of boredom. Inevitably, periods of inactivity and leisure led to what today would be the 'laddish' pursuits of booze and women. In those days most young men were virgins on enlistment, but service in the Far East, the Middle East and Germany did not extend their innocence for very long. Every young soldier was encouraged to equip himself with a prophylactic kit of condoms, cotton wool, antiseptic cream, and instructions; and these provided limited safeguards, but also some encouragement to visit the brothels of Singapore, Berlin, Aden and all points of the compass.

National Service began with a medical examination and an interview. With a mixture of extreme apprehension and some enthusiasm, I reported early – only to founder at my first military hurdle by an inability to provide the urine sample. I could not fill the bottle. I was put to the end of the queue and, late in the afternoon, an impatient medical officer assisted me by turning on all the taps in his examination room. Humiliation No. 1!

Within six weeks of the interview, the buff envelope arrived containing an enlistment notice, a rail warrant and a postal order for four shillings, being an advance of pay. On Thursday, all over England, decrepit steam trains pulled out of stations delivering their quota of raw recruits to Inverness, Darlington, Preston, Worcester, Brookwood and Aldershot. Knowing my family history, I had requested at the initial interview a preference either for the cavalry or the infantry – preferably, for family reasons, the Royal Hampshire or the York & Lancaster Regiments. With typical military precision, I was consigned to the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC). Later I came to realise that my education, slim build and limited muscular development qualified me to drive a lorry, but not for arm-to-arm combat in the infantry. My interviewing officer was absolutely right, and no doubt he eventually retired as a millionaire head-hunter, or a poverty-stricken NHS psychiatric consultant.

The first six weeks in the Army were traumatic for most young men, but not for the public schoolboys, who were already inured to a life of humiliation, grilling, discipline and extreme discomfort. For the majority who had never left home and had been indulged by a loving mother, it was a dreadful change. Suddenly all these young men were thrown together, in rowdy dormitories, with Brummies, Mancunians, Cockneys, Jocks, Geordies, borstal

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boys, graduates, illiterates and public schoolboys. The coarseness, vulgarity and language of the barrack room must have come as a real shock. Sex was the only unifying force – and was virtually the only topic of conversation; banter and the boasting of personal sexual achievement marked out the men from the boys. We had one recruit from Blackpool who boasted that he had ‘f****d’ hundreds of girls standing up against walls outside dance halls, and he was believed. He was the hero of our barrack room.

The horrors and absurdities of the first six weeks of Army basic training will live in the memory of everyone who did National Service – and, indeed, everyone who has subsequently joined the Army, because I do not think the shock tactics have changed very much.

My recollection of events is that on arrival at Oudenarde Barracks, Aldershot, we were issued with our ‘bibles’, namely an AB64 Part One (Soldiers Service book) and Part Two (Pay book). We were then doubled away for an Army haircut, a savage sheep-shearing with clippers, which was followed by a medical and a batch of inoculations. It was wise to be at the front of the queue, because the needle became very blunt after it had been plunged into thirty arms. Kitting out was interesting and followed the Army maxim, ‘If it fits, you must be deformed.’ No item of kit had a simple name. ‘Drawers, cellular green, other ranks, two pairs; blouses, battledress, khaki, other ranks, one’, etc.

There were two theatres of war: the drill ground, on which we spent a third of our time, and the barrack room. The latter was dominated by blancoing webbing, pressing trousers (achieved with an iron on damp brown paper after shaving the rough wool along the crease), scouring all brasses and badges with a wire brush until they could take Brasso, and preparing the ‘best boots’. This latter exercise was performed by scalding off the leather pimples with a hot spoon, or burning off the surface with meths, before applying heated polish and spit over prolonged periods long into the night. This made the boots useless for everything except the parade ground.

Just as a child remembers only the sunny days on an English beach, rather than the frozen Atlantic sea and the biting wind; just as a young Gurkha subaltern remembers the wonderful early evenings in the jungle camp rather than the six-hour trek through swamps with a 60lb pack; so an ex-National Serviceman remembers the good things about Army training rather than the horrors of it all.

It is hardly to be believed, fifty years on, but after I received my National Service commission in the RASC – following a stint at Mons Officer Cadet

School under the legendary RSM Brittain – I was posted back to Oudenarde Barracks, Aldershot as a platoon commander, in charge of these very same recruits that I have just described. At the time I was appalled, because I wanted to travel and see the world, and I wondered what the defect was in my character and military prospects that had led to such a posting. In fact, it was a great education for future life because I was actually responsible every six weeks for a fresh batch of my newly conscripted countrymen, and I still think that they were amazing. The so-called football hooligans of today would if necessary save this country in the future, as they have so often in the past.

By the end of a fortnight, the conscripts were transformed from a disparate and somewhat chaotic rabble into a team. Teddy boys, public schoolboys and borstal boys had joined together to try and win the competition for the best platoon. Although many of the corporals were frightful bullies, they had to get their flock into one coherent and disciplined shape within the two weeks. Some of the NCOs were outstanding in the way in which they instilled pride and determination into these young men. Anyone who has served in the British services knows that the NCOs are the key to an effective and disciplined team. 'There are no bad soldiers, only bad officers', it has often been said, but it would be impossible for both officers and soldiers without good NCOs. In fact, the high reputation of the British Army has always been attributable to its non-commissioned officers.

During the six months that I spent in 1951 with the recruits in Aldershot, I met a fellow officer in the mess who had served with the Gurkhas in the Far East. He used to regale us all with the quality and bravery of the soldiers from the high mountains of Nepal, and I remembered that members of my family had served alongside them in the past. It slowly dawned on me that I had to take some decision about my future career, and I had not the slightest idea about what I wanted to do. I was enjoying my time with the young recruits and I had developed a wary mutual respect with the NCOs in the battalion. It therefore occurred to me that I should contemplate extending my time in the Army, but I did not see great prospects in the RASC. I must have mentioned this to my father, who was keen on the Army – not least because he did not want me to join the family firm in the City which he rightly believed had no great future. Quite by chance he told my great-aunt Lettice, the sister of my grandmother; she in turn volunteered an introduction to a friend of hers, John Crocker, who was a keen Church of England evangelical, like the rest of the family.

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General Sir John Crocker happened to be the Adjutant General, the second most important general in the Army and the man responsible for all personnel affairs! Chance had played its part on my behalf. In due course, a summons to attend the War Office in Lansdowne House, Berkeley Square, arrived in Aldershot via my colonel commandant, who was naturally astonished that one of his most junior National Service officers should be summoned to see the great man.

I presented myself in uniform to the General, and after a happy exchange about the family we launched into my request. I explained my reasons for wanting to join the Gurkhas: admiration for their bravery and reputation, etc., and the long family connection with India. It helped that Martin Nott, my father's brother, had recently been the last British Chief of Staff to the Royal Indian Navy, decorated during the war against the Japanese but made redundant at the time of Indian independence in '47.

General Crocker reflected over my enthusiasm for this adventure, summoned his military assistant, and asked if this could all be made possible. After a brief enquiry, the military assistant returned to say it was impossible, as the Gurkhas did not take National Service officers. I said that in that case I would apply for a regular commission. The General, apparently impressed by my determination and enthusiasm, ended the interview by saying that I would hear from him.

Not long after – the endless tiers of military bureaucracy must have been bypassed – I received a message that I was to be transferred from the RASC to the 1st Battalion The Royal Scots in Wuppertal, West Germany. The Royal Scots was one of four British infantry regiments affiliated to the Gurkhas – the others being the Rifle Brigade, the 60th Rifles and the Cameronians. There I was to undertake one year's apprenticeship to decide not only my fitness for a regular commission, but more importantly my fitness for the Gurkhas.

I had a great time in Germany. Lt Col Melville, the colonel commanding the battalion, was extremely kind to me – and must have given me a good report at the end of my time there. Initially our barracks were on the hilly outskirts of Wuppertal and nearly all of our leisure time was spent on horseback, the regiment having acquired a whole stable of German cavalry horses. When the regiment was posted to Berlin, we took all the horses with us, and had the added benefit of a large covered riding school at Spandau Barracks, just across the road from the imprisoned German war criminals in Spandau Prison. I was given the responsible task for a second lieutenant of commanding the train that

took all the regimental stores, arms, ammunition and horses through the Russian sector to Berlin. Halfway, the Russians stopped the train and demanded my presence in their control hut. Accompanied by two Scottish soldiers, I walked back along the track, head held high, and entered the hut where the Russians closed the door behind me and demanded to see my papers. After a silent exchange, I went to the door to open it – it was locked. I had a moment's horror that I had abandoned the supply train to the Russians. I was wrong, the door opened inwards, and I was free!

Berlin was a fascinating but divided city in 1951. The Berliners had suffered terrible atrocities at the hands of the conquering Russian soldiers in 1945 but, only six years later, it was already a recovering society, active and pleasure-seeking. The main square outside British military headquarters was known to the men of The Royal Scots as 'Gobblers' Gulch', and the most beautiful young German girls were available for a packet of five Woodbines. We young officers raced sailing dinghies on the Wannsee, took part in all the horse shows, and spent several evenings a week on crawls around the proliferating nightclubs, which cost a tax-free half-bottle of gin and had all the vulgarity and perversions in which the Germans excel.

But what really endeared The Royal Scots to me was the character of the Scottish soldiers, whom we called the Jocks. Colonel Melville, at my request, agreed that I should take my platoon on a six-week camp into the Grunewald, the fairly wild park (as it was then) on the banks of the Wannsee. There I subjected my young men to a rigorous training programme during the day, so much so that I was told at the end of it that they were the best trained platoon in the battalion.

Isolated as we were from the rest of the battalion, I got to know the Jocks extremely well. Apart from the NCOs, they were all National Servicemen from Glasgow (although The Royal Scots was an Edinburgh regiment). Most of these young men came from the Gorbals; physically small but wiry and tough, they had an excellent sense of humour but only three consuming interests in life – alcohol, fighting and women. Each evening, although I pretended ignorance of their leisure pursuits outside the camp, they used to get themselves completely plastered before seeking out English soldiers for a fight. If they failed to find their chosen opposition, they returned to the tented camp for a punch-up amongst themselves. By this time I was tucked up in my tent and I ignored their antics. However late and drunk the night before, they were

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always on parade in time, often bearing the scars of the previous night's affray. It may seem all rather shocking in today's climate of opinion, but these were the immediate post-war days and I admired the fighting qualities of my soldiers. I have always believed that Scottish soldiers are the best for attack, but English soldiers for a dogged defence.

One particular episode at the start of my time camping in the Grunewald would linger long in my memory. I wrote an account soon afterwards, as a would-be short story for publication:

For three days I endeavoured to prevent the faithful band of camp followers from hanging around the camp perimeter but since they had every right to be there, there was nothing I could do to drive them away. The situation was made worse by the fact that they found me a source of constant amusement and I had no doubt that they told dirty stories about me to the Jocks. Discipline was being undermined and the situation was undoubtedly getting out of hand.

One of the few valuable things that my father taught me was that it was no use, and indeed quite fatal, to give an order that you could not enforce. I therefore circled the camp with barbed wire and absolutely forbade the men to bring any of these women inside the camp perimeter. Although it was against my military upbringing and training I then turned a blind eye to the men's absence from the camp at night so long as they were present on parade, spotlessly turned out, by 7 o'clock the next morning.

I may say that it was as much as I could do to maintain my temper. Although I was never so unfortunate as to see any kind of disgusting act of love in progress, the bushes surrounding the camp often echoed with giggles and swear words in the German tongue.

Perhaps I should say here and now that the Jocks respected this concession to their animal impulses and kept their side of the agreement by working hard during the day and appearing slightly pale but well turned out on parade each morning. The sight of their women, however, continued to haunt me (although I must say quite a number of them were agreeably attractive).

About one week after our arrival at this spot I decided to take my jeep out one morning and make a reconnaissance of the edge of the lake in order to find a suitable place to practise a water-crossing exercise. It was a fine sunny day. The lake was perfectly calm and reflected the tree-lined hills quite beautifully.

As I drove along the water's edge on this spring morning I felt contented, for my military training programme was going well, yet somehow incomplete. Although at the time I was ignorant of what I lacked, you will realise that the stirrings of my manhood, buried under a Prussian public school training of 18 years, were beginning to make themselves felt. About three miles from the camp there was a small bay that suited my purpose admirably and I therefore left the jeep on the road and walked down to the water's edge.

As I did so, I passed a small boathouse and saw an old man of about 60 sitting beside it smoking a pipe. Wishing to find out exactly where I had come, I approached him and said in the halting English used quite inexplicably by the British when they wish to be understood by a foreigner, 'Do you speak English?' 'Nein,' he replied arrogantly, in the tone of a proud man who had seen his nation beaten twice by the British but had never admitted defeat. Then turning towards the boathouse he shouted 'Inga', and as a young German girl appeared in the doorway he pointed at me in an ignominious way with the stem of his pipe.

'Aha,' I said, 'Can you help me?' 'I will try,' she said in halting English, with a friendly smile. Now at the time, you must realise, this girl appeared to me to be nothing more than a direction-finder in my efforts to find a suitable place for an exercise. I did not notice her as a woman or hardly as a human being. She might well have been described in an Army pamphlet as a 'local inhabitant of an area' who 'will often prove of considerable value in orientating your position'. Nevertheless, I will describe her now, although most of the details of her features and figure only slowly became evident to me in the two days that I knew her.

Although she must have been of medium height, the impression that remains with me is of a heavily built girl whose figure radiated a considerable voluptuousness. Her legs were strong and her calves were thick and muscular. Nevertheless she had a good waist and large soft feminine breasts that her dress contained with difficulty. Looking back on it her face to English taste would have appeared too full of expression and character. In fact when I showed my sister a photograph of her face she described her as looking like a tart!

I do not believe that I have seen, ever again, such genuinely friendly eyes. They had a watery and greenish depth reminiscent of an alpine lake. Her mouth was large and the lipstick that she wore was a deep red so that it enhanced the roundness of her face.

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But more than any other part of her body it was her hair that I quickly noticed, for it was a deep shining brown and it hung in an unkempt and rather stringy manner around her shoulders. I may be wrong, but to this day I look at a girl's hair when I wish to detect her mood. The slightly dishevelled hair of this girl reflected her boredom, her incompleteness and adolescent disharmony with life.

It must I suppose have been the extreme sensuality of this girl coupled with her forthright and completely uninhibited approach that overcame my reserve and shyness. Very quickly we were discussing the beauty of the lake, the islands in its midst and the yachts that lay becalmed throughout its length.

You will understand that any girl that I had ever met before had been as unfeminine and unapproachable as my own shyness had been unconquerable and inbred. Having been brought up at home in an atmosphere of misogyny and educated at an English public school in which the appearance of a maid had appeared unusual, and having understood from my first few weeks from other enlisted men of a different background from myself that women and prostitution were synonymous, my whole concept of the opposite sex was to say the least of it distorted.

On this occasion however I was able to talk and joke with a girl quite freely, and indeed far more freely than my own sense of dignity allowed with my own male friends.

Returning to the camp that night I felt a different man. The feeling of incompleteness that had worried me earlier in the day was gone. As I drove into the camp I passed a group of the men's women who giggled and whispered to one another in an attempt to embarrass me.

My arrogance was however by now complete, since added to the adolescent pomposity engendered by my rank I now also felt an inherent superiority over the Jocks and their whores. Before, although I despised these women and was revolted by their activities, I had no girl of my own. Now I knew a clean, pleasant and wholly attractive German girl who in her looks and conversation was suited to a young officer.

That evening I ordered McDade, my batman, and three other men to blow up the rubber dinghy and to arrange for some sandwiches and a thermos of tea to be ready in the morning. At lunchtime the next day they carried it down to the water for me, and having placed it on the beach they returned and sat on the hill.

At 2 o'clock Inga came to meet me as I had arranged and together we pushed the boat into the lake and set off for a picnic. As I paddled away the four Jocks cheered, laughed and waved, and proud of my conquest I waved back laughingly, understanding how envious they must have been of my good fortune.

After paddling slowly across the lake for an hour I suggested to Inga that we land on a small island and eat the tea that I had brought. She gaily agreed. There for hours I toyed with her, uncertain and hesitant in my actions until she, realising that she was in the hands of a completely inexperienced young man, took control and by suggestion and subtle innuendo indicated the parts of her body that gave her pleasure. However, it was not until darkness came that I could contain my embarrassment sufficiently to explore her buxom body with anything bordering on military precision and even then it would have been difficult to tell who was the more active partner or love's leader.

As the lesson progressed through the gathering darkness, my confidence increased and in the same way that an intangible bond grows up after two Englishmen have sat opposite each other in an otherwise empty railway carriage for four hours without speaking, conversation started and we began to learn about each other and the background to our lives.

'My father and mother were killed by the Russians,' Inga told me, 'when they conquered Berlin and something horrible happened to me. Now I live with my grandparents in Spandau, but they are very old.'

'Do you ever go out in the evening,' I asked, 'with any German boys?'

'There are very few German boys in Berlin,' said Inga.

'You speak such good English – I suppose you learned it at school?'

'Well yes, a little, in fact all. And what about you? You are an English officer and so nice – my grandfather would hate my going out with an English officer. I like the English though and especially the Scottish.'

'Do you know any of them?'

'Oh only one or two ...'

It must have been at about midnight that we reached the edge of the lake and I walked up the path past the camp with Inga and on through the trees for a mile to the main road where I kissed her goodbye. And as I wandered back through the darkness I felt weighed down by sympathy for her life and the terrible tragedies of her youth. Yet at the same time the knowledge that she had confided in me, had given herself to me, and had wept at the thought of my

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one day leaving her, engendered in me a kind of humility that until that day I had lacked. I could no longer feel smug or arrogant because for the first time in my life I had understood and become part of someone other than myself.

Yet as I approached the camp my thoughts were rudely jerked back to the reality of my position and the responsibility that was mine with the men under my command. Sadly I reflected how great could be the benefits that 'my Jocks' might derive from friendship with such a girl instead of their incessant squalid serial acts of physical love in which they indulged with the half-human women of their acquaintance.

Wearily as I reached my tent I sank down upon my bed to find McDade faithfully awaiting my arrival with a mug of tea in his hand.

'Oh well done McDade,' I said. 'My goodness I'm thirsty. How did you guess how welcome this would be?'

McDade just grinned and said, 'I just knew, sir. Oh, how did you find her? A bit of alright, I bet.'

'Yes – jolly good,' I said quite startled. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh only that we reckon Inga's the best bang in Berlin. Until tonight you were the only one in the platoon who hadn't bedded her. Goodnight, sir,' he said and disappeared. My first lesson was complete.

In due course, my time with The Royal Scots drew to an end. The battalion was posted to Korea, a really nasty conflict which was still in progress. My platoon sergeant, who had spent much of his early life in various civilian and military prisons, led a delegation of my Jocks to see me; they made the request that I abandon my transfer to the Gurkhas, and lead them as their platoon commander in Korea. They said it was wrong of me to desert the platoon. It was possibly the most flattering compliment I have ever been paid.

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After taking a regular commission, and attending an interview with General Sir Francis Taker, who had commanded the 4th Indian Division in the desert, then the colonel of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles, I was accepted by the regiment and set off for Singapore.

In my diary, shortly after arrival, I wrote an account of the voyage out:

I left the troopship with very few regrets. It had been a pleasant enough journey but travelling through the Red Sea in August with three other

people in the same cabin can never be very enjoyable. It was very lucky, for sharing with me were two infantry subalterns and one cavalry subaltern, all with a considerable capacity for entertainment which in its way was not lacking. I had been nominated the ship's entertainments officer and therefore upon me devolved the work of amusing the hideous officers' wives and trying not to be amused with the wholly desirable WRACs who occupied the lower deck amongst a seething mass of the brutal and licentious soldiery. It is no wonder that incidents occur on ships. After many years in the fogs and rain of England, the normal person is thrown into tropical climates in a matter of days and, in addition to this considerable aphrodisiac, the very fact of living on top of women makes them seem infinitely more attractive than their merits warrant.

Travelling as first-class passengers among the 'Officers' was an unexceptionally stupid young girl who insisted on washing and pressing all our clothes. To begin with this was an embarrassment, but quickly became a blessing since some men, in particular myself, are both clumsy and useless with an iron. Luckily we also had a lady doctor of doubtful age and of Australian extraction who possessed an amazing sense of fun and a wonderful humour. Being the only faintly eligible girl on the whole ship, she spent every evening in the arms of a different subaltern.

Amongst the eccentric males I must include Dr X, a fine example of Scottish dourness. A National Service doctor, he quickly earned the title of the ship's bore. His whole time was entirely taken up in fawning over two RAF wives, most attractive and young, who were quite exceptional in their determination to remain faithful to their husbands. An unheard-of thing on a troopship.

Being in charge of entertainment, I felt that we ought to have a ship's concert. There was plenty of talent amongst the sailors and soldiers and, although I am not much of an impresario, I reckon that there was plenty among the WRACs. The most adequate act for them appeared to be a private performance of the cancan and, therefore, quite justifiably, I felt it producer's licence to sit back and shout 'higher, higher', as they put in their daily practice.

We had a day in Colombo and another in Aden. Driving out for a day's bathe from Colombo proved a great treat. Bathing for the first time in a warm sea with great rollers breaking on the beach was a happy introduction to the East. Aden, on the other hand, could never be a happy introduction to

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anything and still vies with Calcutta, in my mind, for the title of the most repulsive place in the world ...

I have one other memory of the journey out. It was decided by my committee that we should have a boxing match, but no-one would volunteer. Remembering my past boxing activities at Bradfield, I agreed reluctantly to be a victim. The deck was organised into a standard boxing ring, and all the ship's passengers and company attended. The opponent, much larger and heavier than myself, was quite a thug. Several times he caught me with an awful clout, but I just about managed to remain conscious and on my feet. I lost; but as the smaller member of the contest I became the hero of the occasion and received a hearty cheer. Perhaps this was a fitting prologue to my time on active service in Malaya.

Chapter Three

WITH THE GURKHAS

Worst of all there is no-one to kill; the bandits are too elusive.

(Letter home)

I shall always remember my arrival by troopship in Singapore because, among all the officers on board, I was the only one to be met at the quayside; none of the other officers received a personal welcome and they were simply bussed from the ship to their battalions. The adjutant of the 1st Battalion, Denis Wood, with a Gurkha orderly and a driver, was there to meet me. Years later I was struck by the contrast with Peter Carrington's description of his welcome in the Grenadiers:

It was the custom in the Grenadiers to make newly joined ensigns sharply aware of their insignificance. This was intended to induce humility, to knock out of the newcomer any false feeling of grandeur or achievement ... The salient method was not to talk to him so when I joined nobody talked to me. My brother officers behaved as if I wasn't there.

The 2nd Gurkhas could not have been more different. No-one was addressed as 'sir'; instead, the battalion commander was addressed as 'Colonel' in the mess, where it was obligatory for all other officers to be called by their Christian names. The Guards regiments have a justified reputation, but give me the informal atmosphere of the Rifle Regiment, rather than the hierarchy of the Guards.

In the 1st Battalion, 2nd Gurkha Rifles, I believe that I was at that stage the only second lieutenant. There were around twelve British officers in the battalion, all the platoons being commanded by Gurkha officers, so it was a tightly knit group. Indeed, it was not until 1954 that we were joined by two new officer recruits – John Chapple, who subsequently became Chief of the General Staff and served with me in the MoD, and Digby Willoughby, who won a fine Military Cross in Borneo and has for many years run the Cresta Run in St Moritz. Two

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National Service officers, Brian Skinner and Michael Willis, arrived just before my departure – both first-rate officers and good friends.

It is hard to explain the nature of this great regiment; it had probably seen more continuous active service than any other regiment in the Army. The 1st Battalion had fought right through the desert campaign from El Alamein, then on through Italy to the ghastly battles around Cassino and beyond. Hardly had the Second World War concluded, and Indian independence taken place in 1947, than it found itself in Malaya at the beginning of the communist insurrection, followed by confrontation in Borneo. This meant that several of the British officers and many of the senior Gurkha officers would altogether be on almost continuous active service for twenty-five years. This made for a very individualistic, rather eccentric team of British officers, committed more to the Gurkhas and the regiment than to the British Army as such.

It was somewhat daunting for a young second lieutenant to join a group of such distinction, and it was not long before I recognised that it was one of the most heavily decorated regiments in the British Army. Between 1948 and 1994, the last date for which I have a record, the regiment won 3 DSOs, 21 MCs, 43 MMs, 5 DCMs and 189 Mentions in Despatches. Several of the wartime officers, now majors, had an MC and bar – and we had one officer, Peter Jones, who as a very young officer had been awarded an immediate DSO in the desert. There were also several Gurkha VCs, all retired.

The only sensible thing to do was to launch me into active operations with a company, and so I was sent to join 'C' Company under the command of Tony Lloyd-Williams. 'C' Company was based in an abandoned rubber-tappers' hutted camp, not far from a village called Kulai. This area of South Johore had been one of the strongholds of the communist terrorists in the early part of the Emergency but, by the time I arrived, the worst was over. Nevertheless, it was still our role to patrol the primary and secondary jungle in order to hunt down the bandits, as we called them, set up ambushes on the edge of the villages when they came to collect food and supplies, and generally to operate with police and the Special Branch to clear the area completely of the terrorist threat. Johore had remained the most difficult area for operations in Malaya and had become a regular stamping ground of the 1/2 Gurkhas.

'The Company camp is miles from anywhere in the middle of rubber and we are about 30 miles from the causeway into Singapore,' I wrote home:

There are only two meals a day but you find that more is unnecessary. The only food is what the Gurkhas eat which is called Bhat which is mainly Rice with a sort of curry gravy on top. Sometimes you get dried fish sprinkled on the top. It is amazing but we find (British officers) that a small heap of rice, about a small pudding basin full, manages to satisfy you until 9 o'clock at night. The men are perfect simple country gentlemen. You never hear a complaint and there is without a doubt a happier atmosphere in a Company Camp than you will find anywhere.

Tony Lloyd-Williams was an interesting man and we got on well, although he wisely insisted that in the early months I always went out on patrol with him. The British company commanders were a fiercely independent lot; they knew their job through years of jungle operations and were very reluctant to do the bidding of tactical HQ. The commanding officer was called Gerald Rickcord, a delightful and experienced soldier who had won a DSO with the Royal Ulster Rifles in northwest Europe. But Rickcord was not a Gurkha and the senior company commanders did not readily accept an outsider being imposed upon them. He was given a hard time.

Most of the officers were not interested in promotion – they would never have dreamed of sitting the staff college exam – and only wanted to serve in the regiment. They had rather limited time for the British regiments, although socially everyone got on fine. But outstanding company commanders like Peter Richardson never wished to serve elsewhere or on the staff; their ambition was limited to commanding one of the two battalions of the regiment. This exclusiveness, this inward-looking nature of the regiment, although it added to the high quality and achievement of the battalion, did not help it to assimilate easily into the British Army – language being the other problem because, in those days, everything was conducted in the Gurkha language.

Indeed, looking forward some thirty years from when I was with them, it was fortunate that the 2nd Gurkhas had Prince Charles as its Colonel-in-Chief, General Dwin Bramall, a former Chief of the General Staff, as the colonel of the regiment, John Chapple as Chief of the General Staff and the next colonel of the regiment, and myself as a recently retired Defence Secretary. Those British regiments which could not take up all the recruits that wanted to join the Army at that time looked on with somewhat critical eyes at the continuance of the Brigade of Gurkhas. To evoke the spirit of the

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times, I remember dining in Pratt's Club one night and hearing two elderly Guardsmen complain that it was disgraceful disbanding the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadiers when, instead, it would have been possible to disband the Coldstream Guards altogether! How could we recruit these men from the Himalayas, the British Army asked, admirable and loyal soldiers as they were, when the unemployment queues in England were lengthening and the Army could not take them on? The Brigade of Gurkhas survived, however, in a new form and today fills innumerable manpower gaps in the British Army, at a time when recruiting falls way below the manpower requirements.

Tony Lloyd-Williams, when I came across him, had recently been engaged in one of the classic confrontations of the Malayan Emergency. Major Wimbush, in command of two platoons of Support Company, about fifty strong, stumbled across a jungle camp on a steeply sloped spur occupied by some 250 communist terrorists dug into defensive positions. Wimbush left one platoon to hold the enemy with fire and attempted an outflanking attack through the jungle, followed by a daring charge up a sixty-degree slope. He was shot through the forehead five yards from the first enemy slit trench, the rifleman beside him being killed also.

Due to poor communications, it was not until the next day that a follow-up was mounted by 'C' Company. Lloyd-Williams followed the tracks of the terrorists for several days and eventually came across a hundred bandits dug in around a newly built camp. During the assault on the position, Lloyd-Williams was hit in the back of the head by a bullet from a light machine gun and seemed in a bad way. Tony Wright took command and made a renewed assault on the position of the enemy, who broke off and fled into the jungle. This was one of the worst incidents of the Emergency for the battalion, but happily Tony Lloyd-Williams recovered. I do not recall him ever talking about it on the very many evenings when he and I sat together eating our curry in company camp at dusk.

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It was not long before the battalion was moved north to a place called **Kuab** Kubu Bahru. This was a rather mountainous area below Fraser's Hill, where **Sir** Henry Gurney, the High Commissioner, had been ambushed and killed **two or** three years earlier. With Lloyd-Williams away on leave or a course, and **with** me in temporary command of the company, I had my first opportunity to **lead**

patrols into the jungle. In some respects, the country was easier than Johore because we patrolled mainly in primary jungle which provided a protective tree canopy and was therefore cooler and less thick than so much secondary jungle in Johore; this was where the original trees had been felled and re-growth had occurred.

I found the primary jungle a friendly place, and I think that I was not alone among my colleagues, most of whom had spent years patrolling, in finding it so. After a few days in camp, most of us were quite keen to get back on patrol. There was something primeval, yet rather absorbing and beautiful about it.

A diary account I wrote at the time for my parents gives a good idea of a typical patrol:

Friday. Left the Camp in transport and went about 10 miles, then got out and set off into jungle. Marched through jungle for 2 hours, then stopped and made camp for night. Time about 4.30. Distance covered approx $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. No tracks or bandits seen. The going – Average Primary Jungle, slow going – quite cool – soaking wet with sweat! Got dark 6.30. I was asleep by 8 o'clock. Average night, bed a bit hard.

Saturday. Left base at 8.30 having eaten, and marched approx 2 miles during day. Very hilly, almost mountainous. Got lost at 12 o'clock but soon found out where we were. The going was Primary Jungle, slow and hilly. Reached next base at 4 o'clock and made camp for night. Very exhausted – marching whole day – $\frac{1}{4}$ hour break for lunch only. No bandits or tracks seen.

Sunday. Left previous night's camp at 8.30 having eaten. Marched approx 2 miles during day. No halts. Made Base at 4.30 afternoon. Primary Jungle and very hilly. Rained for half the day. No bandits or tracks seen. The thickness and difficulty of the going can be seen by the time it takes to cover 2 miles.

Monday. Kept base in same place, patrolled area during day. Tracks for 2 bandits found. Half ambushed. No-one came.

Tuesday. Patrolled area. I took section out in afternoon and found good tracks for 2 bandits on way back. It was getting dark, so returned to base.

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Wednesday. Re-supplied with rations and clothing from the Parachute drop. Very accurate. Clothing landed in river nearby but food came down in right place. I took out long patrol of about 4 miles. The going was terrible. Secondary jungle, had to cut every inch of the way. When we were within 100 yards of camp on way back, heard shot. 2 bandits walked into one of our sentries. Both got away. Recovered two bandit hats. We were attacked by a monkey during the day who threw things at us!

Thursday. Moved base camp further South 1,000 yards, are now making camp 3 o'clock. Two Sections out on patrol. No shots heard. Nothing happened.

Friday. Tracks of 2 bandits contacted on Wednesday found beside river. One Section went to investigate. Myself and two men swam crocodile-infested river and patrolled swamp on other side. Saw a lovely tiger very close, a lot of monkeys and crocodiles. Birds absolutely lovely. This place like a lost world – very pretty jungle with a fast flowing wide river in the centre. No trace of two bandits found – returned base at 5 o'clock.

Saturday. This morning waiting for our second airdrop due at 9.15. We received the airdrop and then I joined a different platoon and will stay with them until the operation is over. We left the DZ (Dropping Zone) at 10.15 and went to our new base about ½ mile away. Arrived there at 12.15 and then had lunchtime cup of tea. Two patrols then went out and got back at 4 o'clock. We then made base and it got dark at about 6.30. Nearly put my foot on a centipede which here have a dangerous sting like a snake. It was exterminated with ruthless ferocity by the men around. Received 3 pairs of socks, a towel, 2 vests, 2 pants and a petrol lighter on airdrop, all free. Have so far on this operation worn out 4 pairs of socks and 1 pair of boots. Beginning to feel v. tired at end of day but feel quite fresh each morning.

Sunday. Moved base again this morning. Reached new one at 1 o'clock, having left at 9 o'clock. The first half mile was in jungle but then came into rubber for the first time on the operation – moved then much quicker until we came to Secondary Jungle (10 ft high bracken) which is the worst of all. Had to cut our way through for 300 yards. Had tea on arrival here. 2 Sections are now out patrolling.

Monday. Patrolled in morning and then after tea at midday patrolled through jungle and rubber back to nearest track (about 4 miles) where at 3 o'clock we were picked up by transport and returned to camp.

Had a hot shower and ate big meal. Went to bed early.

I am wiry with considerable powers of physical recovery, but I am not strong and I found eight hours up and down slippery hills, bending and climbing, and wading through streams and swamps with a 60lb pack utterly exhausting. The Gurkhas, short and stocky, were built to carry heavy loads, and from their early youth in the mountains of Nepal they would have had no choice but to carry loads of up to 100lbs for days on end.

It was the Gurkhas' practice to move on a compass bearing, so we needed to cut straight through obstacles rather than go round them along jungle tracks. In this way, the men used to pick up signs of human or animal movement as they criss-crossed tracks. The British battalions were mainly accompanied by Iban trackers, but the Gurkhas were excellent trackers, being true countrymen; they would pick up a print in the ground or a bruised leaf or a snapped twig with considerable skill.

We stopped every hour or so for a breather, having put out sentries, and then on again after ten minutes or so. In this way we covered the ground; but in secondary jungle, with no tree canopy overhead, the leading man often had to cut his way with his kukri through heavy undergrowth, often in great heat with a blazing sun. The secondary jungle was the worst, and there was plenty of it in Johore.

Soon afterwards I tried to describe how I felt going through this secondary jungle:

'I can't go on – I must rest – I must call a five minute halt – I can't go on – we haven't been marching for an hour yet though – we must go on.' Those were the thoughts that raced through my head as in single file we moved through the tall bracken on our way to the next day's camp.

'Why am I doing this? It's sheer hell. I can't go on. I must have a drink of water. Oh hell it's hot,' as the fierce sun beat down on our little party cutting its way through the secondary jungle with no tall trees to give us shade and no flat ground to take the weight of our laden packs evenly on our weary shoulders.

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'God, you weed,' I thought to myself. 'Bhimbahadur in front there is carrying more than you and he is cutting the path for the rest to follow. He is doing far more than you, yet he never complains or stops.'

'Oh, heaven! Time for a halt.' I hold up my hand as a signal for a short rest. Like automatons the men wheel out into a fan around me and sit mopping their brows with their ready weapon balanced in their laps.

As my orderly comes silently up to me and hands me a mug of cool water from the jungle stream, the Gurkha officer smiles as if to say 'Tired?' 'No,' I smile back, 'Fine.'

There is no question of sweating; every man is soaking wet as if he has just climbed out of a bath. The sweat simply runs down the body as if it was rain when one is caught in a storm.

'Time to move,' and we are off again. We are moving against the grain of the country up five hundred feet and down to the river. We have now crossed seven ridges in two hours.

'I can't go on – God! It's hot.' My mind races over a thousand thoughts in a few seconds. But we do go on and on and on...

The pain of the day's trek was, however, more than compensated for by the evenings. We stopped in the late afternoon, in order to build camp for the night – and here the skill and experience of the Gurkhas came into their own. As the officer in charge of the patrol, British or Gurkha, waited whilst the signaller tried to establish communication with tactical HQ – never a simple task, with heavy primitive wireless sets and Morse code – the rest went about their business. Some built platforms along the ground by cutting saplings with the kukris and laying leaves on top as a makeshift mattress. Above they strung ponchos to keep out the rain at night. It nearly always rained heavily during the day – and normally at night – so that we arrived in camp soaking wet, smelly and sweaty. It was a time to get the fires going to dry out clothes for the night, get rid of the leeches, have a bathe in a mountain stream and generally to return half-way to normality. The Gurkhas slept collectively on platforms, but the British officer was always given his own bunk, which his orderly prepared for him. It had a poncho above and below over the leaf mattress, and a mosquito net, which was essential.

Over the whole of the three years that I spent with the Gurkhas, I seldom ate European food. While with the men in camp or out on patrol, the British

officers, almost without exception, lived on Gurkha rations; we were woken with a cup of tea, had the first meal of curry around 10 o'clock in the morning and a second meal of curry in the evening. All these rations had to be carried. I would be happy to have lived the rest of my life on Gurkha food – and in camp at night, on patrol, that Gurkha curry tasted more delicious than any other meal I have ever had.

It was unusual to see a lot of wildlife, but my contemporary account shows that we did meet up with interesting animals on occasions. There were quite a lot of large pythons, but they made themselves scarce. One Gurkha was famously coiled by a huge python, but his brother happened to be in the same section and cut it off him with his kukri. The most dangerous encounter seemed to be with hornets; on two occasions the leading rifleman stumbled across a hornets' nest, which led to a total collapse of discipline as everyone scattered in all directions. Once I had to evacuate two men by helicopter who had been very badly stung. The other nasty animal was the big centipede, which was very poisonous and had a habit of crawling into warm wet jungle boots at night. We did not put on jungle boots in the morning without checking them for centipedes – and scorpions, too. Never in all the months that I spent on patrol did I sleep on the ground – and this is why we British officers, I suspect, fared better than our contemporaries in the British infantry. Our orderlies looked after us like children and were generally quite wonderful, certainly to me.

On one's first patrol the leeches were a little disturbing, but by the second day they were simply part of life. In the evening it was quite normal to find five or more swollen leeches attached to various parts of the body – they were simply burnt off the skin with a little salt or, more usually, with a lighted cigarette. We were meant to take salt tablets during the day to replace the salt lost in sweat. I never did. We were meant to use sterilising tablets in the water bottle when drinking from mountain streams; it was wise if one ever remembered.

Then, of course, there was the daily dose of Paludrine against malaria; most of us were irregular takers of this pill, but I do not remember anyone getting malaria. The worse afflictions were usually boils and skin infections in that hot and humid climate, but generally we were all extremely fit and healthy.

Just occasionally I wished I was somewhere else. 'I am fed up with this beastly country!!' I wrote to my parents after four months in Malaya:

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I object to spending Christmas in a temp of 90°. I object to everyone in the Army other than the Gurkhas. I can't visit Night Clubs, drink myself silly, meet gaytime gals or do any of the more pleasant things in life. There is no time for sailing, fishing, riding or flirting. And worst of all there is no-one to kill; the bandits are too elusive.

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In fact, I managed to escape from our company camp in Kulai every three weeks or so, and subsequently from the tactical HQ, for what the Americans described as 'rest and recuperation', or was it 'recreation'? 'Recreation' frequently involved tracking down Chinese girls of rather low repute. We had our main headquarters in Singapore, so we used the officers' mess as the base for forays into the low life of Singapore – and there was plenty of it before Lee Kuan Yew turned the whole island into a ghastly sexless concrete jungle. I met Lee Kuan Yew on two occasions when he came to visit Margaret Thatcher in London. As we dined together, I did not tell him or Margaret about the joys of the taxi-girls at the Southern Comfort, the Straits Cabaret and the Seventh Storey.

I am astonished how badly behaved we were in those days. If we had been caught, we would have been cashiered in today's climate of political correctness. Both in Berlin with The Royal Scots, and with the Gurkhas in Malaya, inebriated young officers used to pinch street signs and other mementoes of their evenings out. I was sent once on a young officer's course to the Medical Training Centre, somewhere in southern England. The whole campus was littered with demonstration exhibits of how to keep soldiers on active service in healthy conditions. We were very proud of a big sign entitled 'Deep Trench Latrine', which was removed and fixed outside the personal quarters of the brigadier, Royal Army Medical Corps, who commanded the camp.

I wrote an account at the time of a typical night out in Singapore:

First of all we went to the Southern Cabaret – which was always described as 'a place with atmosphere'. There were a host of beautiful Chinese girls, all looking very enticing and glamorous waiting to be invited to dance. 'David' remarked to me, sitting at the bar, that 6 shillings was rather expensive for two gins, but I said that they were undoubtedly charging us for a bar stool which we had stolen from the same place one month previously. Tonight we had returned as men of peace – and lusted after a beautiful Eurasian girl who was

working behind the bar. She took some exception to our comment that she was wearing her backless dress on back to front – and she probably being the girlfriend of the owner, we were asked to move on somewhere else.

The next port of call was the Straits Cabaret where David feasted his eyes on a girl called Jessie who responded with a cold stare which could have passed through three feet of concrete. It registered an emotion which said, 'About time you came back to see me – come along to my house, baby.' She was certainly very beautiful and had recently won a prize as 'Miss Tiger Beer'.

Another evening we went out with a fellow subaltern who was getting married the next day. As he was committing himself to a life of faithfulness he passed on to us a few tips. Among these was that we had to visit the Malaya Bar for lunch at ten minutes to one when we would have the opportunity of meeting the girls from the Singapore telephone exchange. The telephone 'Segamat 99' was, he said, the open sesame to their hearts. What that meant, I do not know. We managed to get away from the wedding reception the next day and, sure enough, met up with two delightful Eurasian girls, one half-Chinese and one half-Filipino. They were wonderful and great fun. Alorette, the Filipino, spoke good English, but her conversation was spiked with American slang. She called the Chinese girl 'a crazy mixed-up kid', yelled behind the car as we went along: 'Excuse our dust', and referred to herself as 'Dynamite'. In spite of her western ways, she was a good Catholic and had to attend family prayers every evening at her home at 8 o'clock. She was my girlfriend in Singapore for quite a time.

My social life in Singapore during these years apparently did not just involve foreign girls. A letter home describes a particularly frustrating episode:

I had an awful evening last night and did not go to bed at all. We arranged to take out two naval officers' daughters and by the time we had picked them up and got back into Singapore it was 10 o'clock; we had a meal then decided to drive out to Changi about 15 miles from Singapore and have a bathe. We bathed for about two hours and it was 4 o'clock when we decided to return. Then one of those idiotic females lost her pearls in the sand and after sweeping half the beach we found them after an hour's search.

When we tried to dress, having found the pearls, we found that all our shoes had been stolen whilst we were bathing. My suede shoes had disappeared and Susie's crocodile high heeled shoes had gone as well. I insisted on backing the

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car up to shine the headlights on the spot and whilst doing so buried the car in the sand up to its back bumper. We tried everything to get the car out but it was no good until all the Indians who slept near the beach came and lifted us out. By this time it was 6 o'clock in the morning and any enjoyment that I had had was forgotten. Then the last straw which broke my back was driving the women home (about 30 miles). Vivian and one girl were having slap and tickle in the back and Susie the little wretch disapproved of the driver dividing his attentions between the car and herself, and so I had to drive the whole way whilst Vivian whose car it was (he had, conveniently for himself, no licence!) was making whoopee in the back seat. I was livid and have sworn never to drive a car on an evening outing again, NEVER.

Susie is only 17 but has the most voluptuous figure and would make an admirable back seat companion ...

Is it any wonder that my grandfather resigned his commission because he could not stand the boisterous nature of mess life, the gambling, drinking and womanising of the young officer class? He had a point.

Altogether, I look back on those days and nights in Singapore with no regrets, just nostalgia. We were on active service in the jungle most of the time, and that is the only excuse I can find for what appears to have been utterly adolescent behaviour.

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When the battalion moved back to Johore after about a year, Colonel Rickcord (still in command) appointed me signals officer and intelligence officer. They were two separate jobs, but there were not enough officers in the battalion to fill both posts. I was sent to find a new tactical headquarters and discovered a pleasant, traditional-style house on the outskirts of Johore Bahru, the southernmost town in Malaya. The house was a Malay brothel; the institution seemed to be attached in some way to the Sultan of Johore's Palace, which was next door. The Sultan by this time was well into his eighties, but was celebrated by his subjects for the number of children he continued to father. I suspect the brothel was connected, in some way, to his libido.

The remainder of my time in Malaya was spent performing these two important functions, at least until John Chapple arrived to take over as intelligence officer; for a few months we worked together. Gerald Rickcord was,

meanwhile, succeeded as commandant by Pat Kent. I had always got on splendidly with my commanding officers, but I did not like Kent, nor he me. Nonetheless, we lived cheek by jowl in headquarters for a year or so, the only other officer being the second in command, Major Jimmy Roberts.

Jimmy was a true gentleman and rather a wonderful man, but some say that, like most Gurkha officers, he was 'quite mad'. He certainly upheld the regimental tradition for eccentricity. He had a great twinkle and saw the humorous side to everything; nearly every evening he had too much to drink. When these drinking sessions were at a pitch, it was Jimmy's habit to get out his shotgun which he kept under the bed, fill it with a cartridge, and with many expletives fire it through the roof. Rickcord and Kent took all this in good heart, but I found this often-repeated experience rather disturbing.

Jimmy was a great explorer and mountaineer. He had opened up many of the most famous Himalayan climbs with Tilman and others. He was made administrative officer, in charge of the Sherpas and the supply chain, in the first successful expedition to Everest under Hunt. He retired, as a much-decorated colonel, to Pokhara (the capital of western Nepal), where he trekked in the hills, bred rare pheasants and founded Mountain Travel, the first and still the best-known trekking company in Nepal. On two separate visits that I made to the high mountains where, in those days, we recruited all our soldiers, Jimmy organised my equipment, Sherpas and porters. Whenever I visited Pokhara, I always called on Jimmy, who used to gather up the soldiers and retired Gurkha officers that had served with me in earlier years. He was, like most of the other senior officers in the battalion, a confirmed bachelor.

At one point, it must have been whilst the battalion was still up north in Kuala Kubu Bahru, Rickcord asked me to join Major General Perowne, GOC 17 Gurkha Infantry Division, as his ADC. Perowne only had four months or so to do before completing his tour in Malaya. I had a most interesting time with him visiting all the British and Gurkha regiments throughout the country. I organised all his travelling arrangements, as well as handling his security and his entertaining. I lived in his house with his wife and daughter. His daughter was a delightful girl, but it is not easy for a young ADC to be living with the General's daughter – a difficult and claustrophobic relationship. This job enabled me to meet Sir Gerald Templer, then High Commissioner, on several occasions, and also General Stockwell, Perowne's immediate superior. The ADCs to generals form a sort of club, gossiping about their bosses, attending all the social

occasions, keeping generals' daughters occupied and generally leading a pretty useless sort of existence. The ADC club had the highest opinion of Templar and a pretty low opinion of Stockwell, who was a very good-looking 'lounge lizard' type of man. I met several of that type when I was Defence Secretary.

As my time as Perowne's ADC ended, I received another summons from Rickcord, this time to go as ADC to a much more important man, General Sir Charles Loewen, who was the Commander in Chief Far East Land Forces, based in Singapore. Templar, as High Commissioner in Malaya, was independent of him and was based in Kuala Lumpur. By this time I was getting quite skilled at dealing with all these generals – but I fear the lessons that I learned did not carry over very successfully to the time when I again had to handle their concerns and welfare in the Ministry of Defence, some thirty years later.

Loewen was a Canadian who had served in India before the war and he had requested a Gurkha ADC for an impending official visit to India and Nepal. The real reason for his trip – and it was a good one – was to enjoy the shikar, i.e. the shooting and hunting. After a time in Singapore, again living in Flagstaff House – all generals seemed to live in houses called Flagstaff House and drive around with red plates on their cars carrying stars to represent their rank – we set off shortly before Christmas 1954 in our own aeroplane. Three weeks later, when the trip was over, I sent my parents a detailed account.

After a night in Calcutta, we headed for a city that seemed to take one back to the fourteenth century. Those who know Kathmandu today can see how it has changed since the 1950s:

The first sight of Kathmandu from the plane is unbelievably lovely as you pass over the mountains and suddenly come into the valley in which Kathmandu is situated. The mountains tower up all around the valley.

The airstrip is perched on the top of a hill and seems most precarious but nothing has ever crashed there since the airport was opened three years ago! On landing you leave civilization and the airport control is in a tin hut with one man who checks the passports etc.

We were met by Summerhays (just knighted) who drove us into the Embassy where we stayed. It is a nice old house with English furniture and food.

The same evening we had two cocktail parties to which all the Nepalese notables were invited. The Prime Minister, B.P. Koirala, and several of his Congress Party members had spent many years incarcerated in the dungeons

of the Rana family but they all seemed to get on famously. Edmund Hillary was also there.

The next day we spent a morning sightseeing. Kathmandu is the most beautiful city I have ever seen. The architecture is superb and the carving on all houses is a work of art. The brick is a beautiful mellowed red. It is a very old city and completely unspoiled by civilization. Cars are few and far between and seem only to be owned by the Maharajahs. It is almost an event if you meet another car on the road and often occupants get out and shake hands in the street. The centre of the town is taken up by an enormous grass parade ground. You can see a market, a caravan from Tibet, an Army parade and a game of cricket all going on there at the same time!

The most interesting visit we paid was to the Defence Minister General Sir Kaiser Shamsheer Jungbahadur Rana GCB, GCSI. An old man who is probably the most famous sportsman of the East. His house (about the size of Buckingham Palace) was absolutely piled high to the roof with stuffed tigers, panthers, elephants, every conceivable animal you can imagine. Each one had a story. This one had been wounded by the Prince of Wales and the General finished it off. Another had been presented to him at the shoot by Edward VII and so it went on. Right through the centre of the house ran a cold dark passage which had books lined on both sides. The collection would put the Bodleian Library to shame. When we reached the end of the house we came into a room in which his wife was waiting. An absolutely lovely girl of about 25 (he is 80). Her portrait painted by Graham Sutherland was on the wall and there were a number of Vernon Ward's and Peter Scott's which he had collected while Ambassador in London. We then sat down and his sons (all Generals!) produced three cases of Champagne, one bottle of which he consumed himself.

The next day we left Kathmandu and flew back to Calcutta, so ending quite two of the most fascinating days of my life.

Then, after a trip to Darjeeling where we recruited the Eastern Gurkhas and where we were entertained by Sherpa Tensing, it was on to Lehra, near the other Gurkha recruiting depot in India, for Christmas and New Year:

The camp near Lehra is most attractive and the mess a lovely old country house. The whole place is completely cut off and isolated about 20 miles from the Nepalese border.

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On 24 Dec we had a Duck Shoot, leaving the mess at 11.30 and starting the shooting at 12.30. It was the greatest fun and we collected a total of 17. None fell to my gun, but I have never done any of this shooting before. I was also firing from a standing position in a hollowed out tree-trunk which made it extraordinarily difficult to balance. There was a total of 8 guns with numerous boatmen, beaters, etc., so that it was quite a large party.

On Christmas Day we had the traditional Football Match between the British officers and the Gurkha officers. Then the Gurkha officers for drinks in the mess and Christmas Dinner in the evening.

On 28–29–30 Dec we had shooting parties. Two duck shoots for which we got up at 2 o'clock in the morning, both reasonably fruitful. One Snipe shoot and also a crack in the jungle near Lehra after tiger with .303 rifles.

On the 31st Dec there was a buffet lunch in the mess to which all the local planters etc. were invited. Two Tibetan Girls aged about 18 also came and boy oh boy were they honeys. They spoke perfect English, were beautifully dressed and very feminine. A wonderful race the Tibetans. On 1 Jan we set off for Delhi and reached there at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We were met by Lady Clutterbuck, the wife of the High Commissioner, and drove in their Rolls to their house.

That evening we were invited out to Dinner and so had quite a late night. In spite of this we set off at 3 o'clock in the morning (the same night) for a duck shoot outside Delhi. We were in position at 6 o'clock standing up to our knees in the coldest water I have ever known. There were plenty of duck there and geese but they were all out of range. And by breakfast at 8 a.m. we were tired, wet and cold with only two duck to show for it. After breakfast however we walked the dry ground around the lake and managed to get 12 partridge; it really was the greatest fun.

Whilst staying at the High Commissioner's residence when we were not out duck shooting, I got up each morning at 5.30 to exercise the horses of the President's bodyguard on the polo ground in Delhi. My boss – General Loewen – was welcomed as a hero, because this was the first official visit by a full British general since Indian independence. We were feted everywhere. My own most enthusiastic hosts were the Sikh officers of the President's bodyguard; hence my early morning rides. It certainly helped that I was a Gurkha officer – implying, I fear rather inaccurately, that I was something of a martial figure myself.

We returned to Singapore on 4 January. One day soon afterwards I was looking at the Foreign Office telegrams, which came via me on their way to the General, when I was struck by a sudden flash of inspiration. How was it possible, when I read about these huge and fascinating strategic and foreign policy issues, that I could ever stay in the Army? We were, after all, participating in what Graham Greene described as 'the forgotten war'. The world was so big and so absorbing that I had to be where it was all happening. Where else could that be but politics? I suddenly realised that I had to be in the centre of things – where great issues were discussed, where decisions were made. It had nothing to do with helping my fellow human beings; it had everything to do with intellectual curiosity and the impulse to be where the most important events were taking place.

It is one of my life's ironies that the trigger to go into politics should have been a few Foreign Office telegrams. When I eventually gained ministerial office, I found that Foreign Office telegrams were the biggest waste of the world's trees that I had ever encountered. Without bothering to read most of them, I tipped them into a garbage bag. The *Sun* newspaper had more useful information about the world than all the gossipy Foreign Office telegrams put together.

My father was initially opposed to my decision to leave the Army, and in a long letter towards the end of 1955 I explained to him my reasoning:

1. I have not got the great future that you predict. Perhaps I could reach full Colonel at the highest.
2. My temperament is NOT suited to the Army. I am a rebel by nature. I like speaking my mind. I like free discussion and controversy.
3. I have always ridden near the precipice with some of my superiors whom I consider idiots and tell them so.
4. I have always had good, even exceptionally good reports from my Commanding Officers but they have had no option since, if I might say so, I have done my work well and capably. Some of them, particularly the present one, regard me with suspicion.
5. I abhor the intellectual blight of the Army and its pomposity.
6. I am now earning a lot of money but how many children will I educate on a Lt Col's pay of £800 a year or a pension of £500?

7. I like England, good furniture, a fire, my possessions.

8. I know that I am physically and mentally suited to politics.

Finally, at 23 I have had the best out of the Army, e.g. Travel, Excitement, a wild life. As I get older, I more and more hanker after mental stimulation and the wish to get on and do something for myself instead of rising slowly by age and not ability.

Fortunately I had obtained at Bradfield adequate examination results to qualify me for Cambridge entrance. A fellow Gurkha officer, Roderick Goldsworthy, recommended Trinity College, where he had been himself, so I wrote to the admissions tutor, Michael Vyvyan, asking if I could have a place. Perhaps also influenced by a letter of recommendation from John Chapple (who had also been at Trinity), his charming reply said that the college would welcome a former Gurkha officer. It was all as simple as that – and it was arranged that I should go up to Trinity in the autumn of 1956.

There was, however, the small question of money. I applied for – and obtained – a county scholarship from Kent, as I was deemed as a regular soldier to be independent of my parents. This, together with my Army savings, saw me through Cambridge as a relatively wealthy undergraduate. Those savings almost entirely consisted of my allowance for the purchase of English food, some £1,000, quite a lot in 1956. During my three years, with the exception of the occasional European dish in the mess at Slim Barracks, Singapore, I had lived on Gurkha rations. The rest of my Army pay, I regret to say, had been blown on thrashes around Singapore's night life, and enough has been said about that already.

For what would be my final phase in the Army, I had returned to my duties as signals officer, where things were rather different for me as, mentally, I had moved on. Whilst I was away, the best young riflemen in the battalion had been called together to form a new signals platoon and, on my return, I trained them well in the new smaller wireless sets which had just been issued by the Army. Subsequently, most of my signals platoon became Gurkha officers, and one of them the Gurkha Major of the battalion – that is, the most senior Gurkha. On my visit as Defence Secretary to Pokhara in 1982, half of my old platoon walked two or three days from their homes in the hills to welcome me back to the signals platoon and to Nepal. It was quite an emotional occasion, particularly when a retired rifleman signaller, Gurkha Major

Humbahadur Thapa, presented me with his personal cane bearing a silver band with his name; it is still one of my most prized possessions.

Pat Kent, my commanding officer, did not take my application to resign with a particularly good grace; perhaps he thought that the resignation of a promising young officer was in some way a reflection on him. He expressed astonishment that any soldier would wish to enter politics and was surprised that I had decided to go to Cambridge. By this time, however, the keen and ambitious John Chapple had arrived, and as he had attended Trinity it offered, maybe, some explanation of how these strange young officers behaved.

My departure from the regiment was quite upsetting. I said goodbye to my signals platoon, but I don't think they realised, or would have understood, that a British officer would choose to leave. I did not want to face a gathering in the mess, because I felt something of a traitor. So I sneaked out one night without saying goodbye to anyone. It was hardly the correct way to behave.

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Reflecting on my Army service, approaching fifty years later, I realise that it was all a great experience. In many ways, I developed a closer relationship with the British soldiers in the basic training depot in Aldershot, and with the men in The Royal Scots, than I was ever able to do with the Gurkhas. If I had spoken Gurkhali more fluently, it might have been otherwise. Although I had passed the language exam – and was paid an overseas allowance and a Gurkha language allowance as well as an English food allowance! – communicating in another language did not enable me to get as close to their interests, concerns and prejudices as I would have wished. It is fascinating to find how well today's young Gurkhas fit into the environment of the Parachute Regiment and other British units of the Army. Times change – and today's Gurkha recruits are rather different from their predecessors.

The foothills below Annapurna which run at around 6,000–8,000 ft have been the traditional recruiting ground for all the western Gurkha regiments. Whole villages like Ghandrung contained families that had produced recruits for the British Crown for over 150 years. These families were the yeomen farmers of the middle hills, prosperous relative to their neighbours, based on the ownership of fertile terraced land – and sustained by Army pensions. These men were tough, resourceful countrymen, retiring eventually as respected headmen of their village.

Here Today, Gone Tomorrow

It is not the same today. Over-population in the hills, more particularly caused by tourism, has destroyed the environment. Trekkers, who have doubled the population numbers in these areas, demand hot meals and water, which in turn requires wood for cooking and heating. The hills have been largely denuded of trees to meet the demands of the trekkers. Landslides caused by deforestation have swept whole areas of terraced land into the rivers. Many of the traditional service families have abandoned the hills and moved to Pokhara, and the plains that border India, partly in order to obtain medicine and schools. Today's young recruits are more easily able to integrate with British troops, but in many cases are no longer the unsophisticated hill soldiers of earlier times. Instead, they will be more demanding, more 'political' in their attitudes and ambitions – but possibly more valuable to the changed British Army of today.

The 2nd Gurkha Rifles no longer exists – except as an old boys' club. The four British regiments were amalgamated in 1994 into the newly formed Royal Gurkha Rifles. I am sure the men are just as fine, resourceful, loyal and upright as they always were. But it is not the same for me. I attended the final parade of my regiment at Sandhurst in 1994. I don't think that I, a mere Gurkha officer of only three years' standing, was the only man there with tears running down his cheeks.