

The Gurkhas: the feared and fearless soldiers of Nepal
Stars Insider



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There are many elite military forces that instill senses of fear and wonder, from the Navy SEALs to the Green Berets, but none are quite as fascinating as Nepal's Gurkha brigades. These expertly trained, unshakably fierce soldiers from the mountains of Nepal have a history that stretches back hundreds of years. Indeed, they have been instrumental forces in some of the most pivotal conflicts in modern history.

*Today, they are most known for their work under the **British military**, but they also hold elite status in their own army of Nepal, the Indian army, and other specialized units around the world.*

So, who are these mysterious warriors with the reputation as a group more dangerous than any other? Read on to find out.

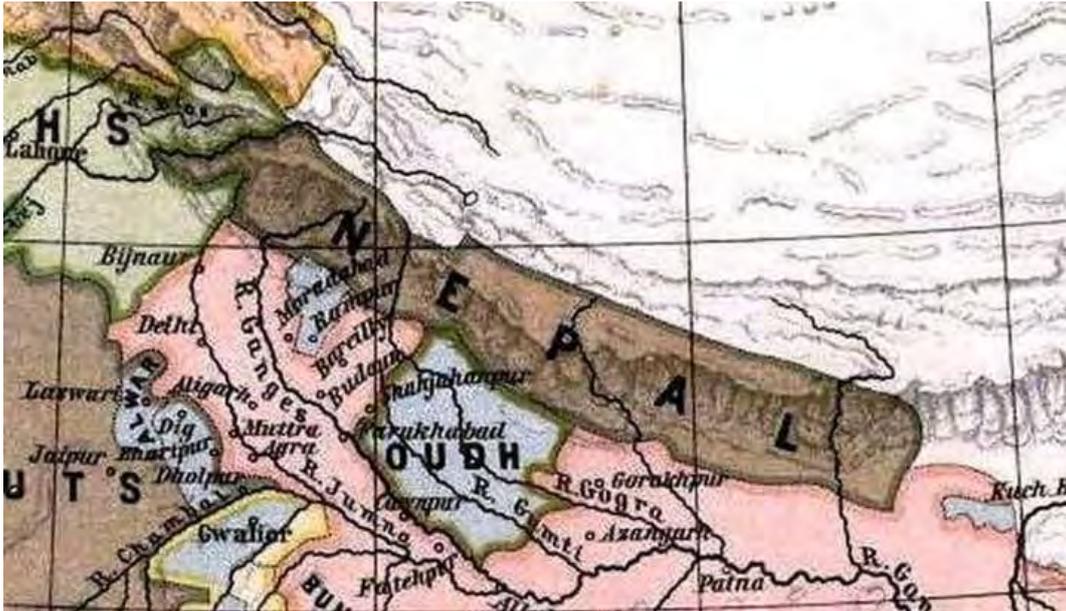


Who are the Gurkhas?

*The Gurkhas are the infamously hardened, disciplined, and feared soldiers born, raised, and trained in the mountains of Nepal who have fought for the English **Crown** for centuries.*

Where are they from?

Historically, Gurkha soldiers were from a select few impoverished villages high up in the mountains of Nepal in the Gorkha region, but today they are recruited from all across Nepal.



The origin of the word

The progenitor of the modern state of Nepal was the old Gorkha Kingdom, the citizens of which were known as "Gorkha," "Gurkha," or "Gorkhali." The name is assumed to originate from the ancient Hindu guru Gorakhnath, who is also the namesake of the modern Nepali province of Gorkha.



When did they originate?

While the term Gurkha was once used simply to describe the Nepali army as a whole, the specialized Gurkha units as they're known today originated during the 19th century after the Anglo-Nepalese War.



The Anglo-Nepalese War

The Anglo-Nepalese War was fought from 1814 to 1816 primarily between the Kingdom of Nepal's Gurkha army and the private armies of the English East India Company over opposing claims to the mountainous regions of northern India.



The Anglo-Nepalese War

While Nepal was ultimately defeated by the British forces, the victors were nonetheless extremely impressed by the fearless and disciplined Nepali forces, and began recruiting them into the service of their own armies.



The First Gorkha Rifles

After recognizing the incredible fighting power of the Gurkha forces, around 5,000 of the Nepali fighters were recruited first into the East India Company's private army, and later absorbed into King George's army, where they were designated as the First Gorkha Rifles, the first of many Gurkha regiments to be created in the royal army.



The Gurkhas in World War II

By World War II, there were around 110,000 Gurkha fighters divided into 40 regiments. These regiments were deployed to nearly all fronts of the war, and were the dominant force in the conflicts against Axis powers in Southeast Asia.



India's independence

Shortly after World War II, in 1947, when India gained its independence from the United Kingdom, the Gurkha regiments under the Crown's leadership, many of which were stationed in India, were split between England and the newly independent India. Today, there are prominent Gurkha regiments in England, India, and a few other countries.



Singapore Gurkha Contingent

The elite squads of Singapore's police force are part of the Singapore Gurkha Contingent, formed in 1949. It is this Gurkha Contingent that are tasked with the most high-profile security jobs, and also act as Singapore's riot squad. They are said to be widely respected throughout the city-state.



The Gurkha motto

It is only fitting that a group of warriors so famous and feared would have an equally fearsome motto. "Better to die, than be a coward," the saying goes. Ex-Indian Army Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw has been quoted as saying, "If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or he is a Gurkha."



A Gurkha's training

Of course, it's no coincidence that every Gurkha soldier seems to exist at the pinnacle of courage, loyalty, and discipline. The path to becoming a fully recognized Gurkha soldier is long and punishing, and highly selective.



Grueling tests

All applicants, before participating in the mental and physical tests, must provide an education certificate and proof of Nepali citizenship. Next comes tests of extreme physical strength and endurance, including 70 rapid sit-ups in two minutes.



Grueling tests

The most difficult and anticipated test is known as the doko race, an uphill, 3-mile (5-km) sprint run while carrying 55 pounds (25 kg) of sand in a traditional Nepali doko basket, held by a strap around the runner's head. Recruits are expected to finish the race in no more than 46 minutes.



A chosen few

The guidelines put in place are meant to be treated as minimum requirements, and only the upper echelon of participants will become Gurkhas. In 2017, of the 25,000 aspiring applicants, only 230 were accepted into the ranks.



The kukri

The traditional weapon of the Gurkha, since the times of the Kingdom of Gorkha, is the kukri, a machete-style blade that curves forward. While blades are rarely used in combat today, Gurkha soldiers still carry them into battle.



The law of the kukri

An old Nepali legend claims that once a kukri is unsheathed from a soldier's scabbard, it must draw blood before it is replaced. This legend isn't taken to heart in modern times, but there are stories of wounds being self-inflicted in order to adhere to this law of the kukri.



Legendary bravery

Ever since the Anglo-Nepalese War, the Gurkha have been admired and respected for their unwavering bravery. Even though the British did emerge victorious, it wasn't by a very wide margin, and the British generals were profoundly impressed by the prowess of the mountain warriors.



Legendary bravery

Gurkha squads and regiments have fought in both world wars, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, and the Falklands, just to name a few. In the Falklands, legend has it the Gurkhas struck such deep fear in the hearts of their enemies that the Argentinian fighters fled at the first sight of the Nepali soldiers.



They've earned 26 Victoria Crosses

The Gurkha's bravery and sacrifice for Great Britain hasn't gone unnoticed. Since the Victoria Cross, the highest honor of valor given in the United Kingdom, was introduced, it has been awarded to Gurkhas or British officers serving with Gurkha regiments 26 times.



Dipprasad Pun

There have been countless Gurkha heroes over the centuries. One such soldier is Dipprasad Pun, who was ambushed by Taliban forces in 2010. Pun managed to single-handedly neutralize 30 Taliban fighters in under an hour. For this incredible feat, Pun was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross, the second-highest honor awarded by the British military.



Lachhiman Gurung

During World War II, Lachhiman Gurung and his troop were in a firefight against Axis Japanese fighters who were barraging the Gurkha fighters with hand grenades. Gurung managed to throw to grenades back, but the third destroyed his right hand. Nonetheless, Gurung continued to fight and shoot with his left hand, and stayed in active service for another two years. Gurung was awarded the Victoria Cross.



Bhanubhakta Gurung

Bhanubhakta Gurung, another World War II Gurkha fighter, was awarded a Victoria Cross for his successful one-man assault against an Axis stronghold in Burma.



Gaje Ghale

In 1943, during his first real combat experience, Gurkha Gaje Ghale sustained serious wounds to his chest and one of his arms from a grenade blast. Staying true to the Gurkha reputation, Ghale continued to fight and shoot with his good arm until the enemy was pressed far away from their objective, and only then did he seek medical treatment. Ghale and other members of his troop were awarded the Victoria Cross.



What are Gurkhas paid?

Until recently, despite their massive sacrifice and invaluable contribution to British war efforts, Gurkha soldiers were only paid one sixth the pension of their English counterparts. The English government claimed this was because of the lower cost of living in Nepal, where they expected their Gurkha soldiers to return after their service to and residence in England, the minimum service being 15 years.



The fight for fair pensions

Numerous Gurkha veterans and advocacy groups fought for a change in this colonial-era policy and finally, in 2007, the British government announced that all Gurkhas who retired after 1997 were eligible to receive the full pension they deserved.



Gurkha citizenship

Another disservice to Gurkhas that persisted for centuries was that Gurkha soldiers weren't guaranteed British citizenship or the right to settle in Britain after their minimum service of 15 years. This was rectified in 2004, but many groups and individuals remained unsatisfied because of the large number of retired Gurkhas who remained ineligible for the new policy.



The Gurkha Welfare Trust

The Gurkha Welfare Trust was established in the 1960s to help forgotten Gurkha veterans. Most active Gurkhas today also all donate a day's pay each year to organizations like the Gurkha Welfare Trust.



Prince Harry toured with a Gurkha regiment

Prince Harry toured with the First Gurkha Rifles during his stint of active duty in Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008. The Prince was quoted as saying, "When you know you are with the Gurkhas, I think there's no safer place to be."

Sources: ([Forces.net](#)) ([Ranker](#)) ([The Gurkha Welfare Trust](#))