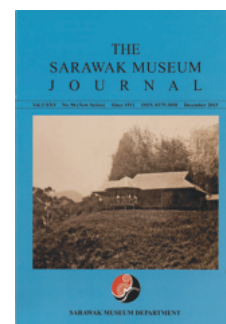




The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXXV No. 96

December 2015



ISSN: 0375-3050
E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: AVM Horton. (2015). Book Review. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXXV (96) : 267-270

BOOK REVIEW

AVM Horton

INTRODUCTION

This book, published to celebrate two hundred years of uninterrupted Gurkha service to the British Crown, a narrative of a month-long operation in Helmand province in mid-2006, interweaved with flashbacks covering the author's earlier life, along with supplementary sections discussing Nepalese history, society, religion, traditions, and relaxations. The opening chapter is lifted out of context in order to provide a 'cliff-hanger' (pp. 5-11), designed to hook the interest of readers, who have to wait until pp. 264-8 to discover that the event was something of a damp squib. The volume is dedicated to Lance Corporal Gajbahadur Gurung (1985-2012), a courageous and talented comrade of the author who was killed-in-action during a later operation in Afghanistan (page v, where the name is misspelled 'Guring', and pp. 28, 62, 64-5, 69, 329-30).

BOOK REVIEW

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Colour Sergeant Kailash Limbu, *Gurkha: Better to die than live a coward: My life with the Gurkhas* (with maps by John Gilkes; Little, Brown, London, 2015; hbk, £20.00; ISBN 978-1-4087-0535-3 hbk, ISBN 978-1-4087-0536-0 pbk; viii + 340pp; maps, plates, index).

This book, published to celebrate two hundred years of uninterrupted Gurkha service to the British Crown, comprises a narrative of a month-long operation in Helmand province in mid-2006, interweaved with flashbacks covering the author's earlier life, along with supplementary sections discussing Nepalese history, society, religion, traditions, and relaxations. The opening chapter is lifted out of context in order to provide a 'cliff-hanger' (pp. 5-11), designed to hook the interest of readers, who have to wait until pp. 264-8 to discover that the event was something of a damp squib. The volume is dedicated to Lance Corporal Gajbahadur Gurung (1985-2012), a courageous and talented comrade of the author who was killed-in-action during a later operation in Afghanistan (page v, where the name is misspelled 'Guring', and pp. 28, 62, 64-5, 69, 329-30).

Better to Die than Live a Coward, the Gurkha motto (p. 208), is the story of an ordinary hill boy from Nepal whose ambition was to be a Gurkha from as far back as he could remember; it is the personal record of how a few dozen men of the second battalion of the Royal Gurkha Rifles held out at Now Zad against the combined forces of the Taliban insurgency at a time when the area was largely under their control (pp. 1-2).

During the month the unit was at the compound it was 'in contact' with the enemy (the Taliban) no fewer than twenty-eight times on eleven different days, expending approximately 49,000 rounds of ammunition, throwing twenty-one grenades, and firing three interim light anti-tank weapons. This excludes ordinance expended in air support operations. In a siege situation, the unit suffered only one minor casualty but is thought to have killed around one hundred of the enemy (p. 326). The author was mentioned in dispatches for his part in the campaign. His proudest moment was to receive a letter of congratulation from the Colonel-in-Chief of the regiment, no less than HRH Prince Charles himself (p. 179). A modest man, Corporal Kailash Limbu (as he then was) said his act of bravery was something anybody would have done in the same situation; well, something any *Gurkha* would have done.

One puzzle about this publication is that the copyright is claimed by one 'A.R. Norman' (page iv), otherwise unacknowledged, unmentioned, and unindexed; unless it is a pseudonym, it would raise questions about the true provenance of this narrative.¹ The named author, at any rate, certainly displays an amazingly detailed recollection of events which took place more than eight years before the date of publication. He also possesses an apparent word-perfect recall of fairly lengthy and complicated dialogues, all the more remarkable given that he did not keep a diary (p. 97). In a front-cover imprimatur, Joanna Lumley states that the book 'reads like a thriller'; indeed it does.

Why would anybody *wish* to join the Gurkhas? 'Because I like fighting. And I like guns. I want to do some proper shooting' (p. 228). As an alternative Kailash Limbu entertained for some time the idea of becoming a doctor, because he had seen his mother fall ill after a difficult childbirth and wished to do something to help her (pp. 136-8, 230, 316). But his key role model turned out to be his paternal grandfather, who had served briefly with the Gurkhas 'in the British Army in India, around the time of Partition in 1947' (p. 19). Another inspiration was Captain Rambahadur Limbu; I am afraid, however, that he was awarded the VC for service in the Sarawak theatre of war, rather than 'in Malaya' (page 142, paragraph 2, line 2). Given his desire to honour the 'great man', the author will be disappointed to have made such a basic mistake.

Kailash Limbu was born in 1981 on his family's farm at Khebang village in Taplejung district, located in the far east of Nepal. 'Kailash' is the name of a holy mountain in Tibet, whence the Limbu people originated: his maternal grandfather opined that Kailash was going to be 'tall and strong as a mountain' (p. 12). Until the age of seven he lived with his parents in his paternal grandfather's house (p. 14). The family followed the ancient Kirat faith (pp. 13, 59, 65). The lad grew up without electricity and he was fifteen before he saw a motor car for the first time. His childhood was 'all about playing – and fighting – with other children as we accompanied our elders to the fields' (p. 15). Most of his earliest memories involved fighting 'which I really enjoyed' (p. 17). It was a happy time, 'little different from that of my ancestors for hundreds of years' (p. 23). He had to help out on the family farm, growing rice and maize, plus some wheat and potatoes along with fodder for cattle (p. 23). Any difficulties 'were eased by the fact that we bore them all together as a family – a fact that has helped me a lot in later life. As a Gurkha you do the same. When we face hardship we do not face it just as one person but as a member of a group – a section, a platoon, a company, a battalion, and finally a whole brigade. You are never alone. In fact you could say that to be a Gurkha is to be a member of one very big family, of which your section is the closest part' (p. 24).

A star pupil at school, Kailash Limbu excelled at sporting activities, such as volley-ball, football, and kick-boxing (pp. 135-6). Hunting was his 'favourite pastime' (p. 104). After passing his School Leaving Certificate aged seventeen, he enrolled for a science course at Hattisar College, the nearest place of higher education (p. 138); but his heart was set on joining the British Army Gurkhas, not entertaining for a moment the idea of enrolment with Gurkhas in the Indian Army or the Singapore Police Force. It had to be the British Army Gurkhas or nothing (p. 234): 'the standards are higher, the tradition is longer, and the history is the best'. Yet there was only a one-in-a-thousand chance of passing the three selection boards (p. 144); acceptance in itself brings honour to the recruit and to his family (p. 147). In 1999, when he was indeed selected for the British Army, he did not think it possible 'for a human being to be prouder or happier than I was at that moment' (p. 262). It was proof of his 'manhood' (p. 103).

The new recruit was sent to Church Crookham for basic training. He swore an oath of allegiance to the British crown (p. 292). A lance corporal by the age of twenty-one (p. 254), he had been promoted to Platoon Sergeant by 2011 and later advanced to the rank of Colour Sergeant. He hopes eventually to become a late entry officer (p. 328). Besides four tours of duty in Afghanistan (2003, 2006, 2008-9, and 2011), he has also been on operations in Bosnia and Sierra Leone, besides being posted to the United Kingdom and to Negara Brunei Darussalam, referred to here as 'Brunei' (*sic*). A shy person in his youth (p. 147), he is now married (to Sumitra) and is father to a daughter (Alisa, b. 2003) and a son (Anish, b. 2006), the latter already under pressure to continue the family tradition of service with the Gurkhas (pp. 84, 328).

Known as *Khebang-solti* (Mr Nice Guy from Khebang, p. 234), he possessed a 'really good military brain' (p. 307). He was a 'perfectionist' (p. 248) and 'completely honest' (p. 304), but also 'a hard man' (p. 232). He provides some insight into military leadership: 'command and control in a battle situation', he says, 'is often as much about reassurance as it is about coming up with brilliant ideas'. The soldiers under your command need to be reassured that 'you are in charge of the situation – even when you're not' (p. 39). Leadership is lonely: their [his underlings'] welfare was my responsibility but my welfare was not their responsibility' (p. 227): 'I was thinking about them all the time. Were they getting enough to eat, enough rest, enough exercise? Did they have a good conversation when they last called home? No family worries? Are they coping with the heat? How are they coping with coming under attack? Are they getting on each other's nerves?' (p. 227). He insisted on endless checking of weapons, equipment and supplies. Then he had to consider the ammunition situation. And then there was

the enemy to worry about, such as the ever-present danger of ambush and concerns about possible land mines and suicide bombers. Eagle-eyed vigilance had to be maintained at all times; the slightest mistake could prove to be fatal. As an NCO, the author says, 'You have to lead by example, and they have to know that you would be willing to give up your life for them. But it is also important for them to know that you would not hesitate to punish them severely for wrong-doing – most especially if it brought the Brigade of Gurkhas into disrepute in any way' (p. 304). The leader has to show the troops 'that you are a little bit better than them at everything' (p. 69). Gurkhas are noted for their humour; so there was always laughter, no matter how grim the circumstances. For recreation the author enjoyed playing chess and *bagh chal* or 'tiger game', which is 'a bit like draughts' (pp. 87-8).

The author asks the enemy rhetorically: 'Why are you trying to kill me? I didn't come here to kill you. I didn't fire a single shot at you, not before you tried to kill me. I'm not here because I wanted to kill you. I'm here because I was sent to help. To help you and your people. But you are here because you want to kill me. Tell me why' (p. 199). In the text all of this is in italics, presumably to emphasise the central importance of the queries so far as the author is concerned. The reader would not have to be either an Afghan or a Muslim, let alone a member of the Taliban, to be able to suggest some fairly sharp responses. To give a more polite one, if Colour Sergeant Kailash Limbu really wished to 'help' the people of Afghanistan, perhaps he would have been better advised to become a doctor after all; this might have placed him in a position to save some lives.

Meanwhile, the bravery, competence, and efficiency of the Gurkhas may be saluted. No doubt they *are* the best soldiers in the world: they have been awarded the Victoria Cross thirteen times to prove it (p. 140). 'In the end we always win. We are Gurkhas' (p. 200).

Note

- ¹ Postscript. The publisher's website (accessed at 1124h BST on Saturday 15 August 2015) lists 'Alexander Norman' as the joint author.