

Queen's Gurkha Signals History



Hong Kong 1971-1997

The end of the Borneo confrontation and the demise of 17th Gurkha Signal Regiment in 1971 marked the end of an era. The Regimental Headquarters of the Gurkha Signal Regiment left Brunei and moved to Sek Kong, following closely in the footsteps of the newly reformed 248 Gurkha Signal Squadron who had moved into Sham Shui Po in July 1971. The Regiment then began the second half of its life in peace-time soldiering, a condition it was totally unused to having spent 14 years of its 16 years existence on active service. But after numerous Territory, Brigade, and Regimental exercises over the following years the

Regiment then proved that it had not lost its skills when it went to war twice; firstly in 1982 in the Falkland War and then in 1991 in the Gulf War.



1971 saw a return to the fold of the Regiment's contingent to the Annapurna South Face Expedition led by world famous climber **Chris Bonnington**. Chris Bonnington had approached the Brigade of Gurkhas in 1969 for a liaison officer in Nepal to orchestrate all the supplying and paperwork of the expedition. The Regiment knowing **Captain Kelvin Kent**'s desire to be part of a large Mountaineering expedition readily volunteered him. Kent together with **Lieutenant (QGO) Bishnuparsad Thapa** and **Signalman Gambahadur** (later Major (QGO) Gambahadur Buduja Gurkha Major), provided sterling work to assist the expedition to its base camp at 12,500 ft properly supplied and equipped. They then maintained communications between Pokhara Base Camp and the team climbing, through out the expedition. Although this attempt to climb the mountain was unsuccessful it began an association with mountaineering expeditions to Nepal which the Regiment has continued. The Regiment has supported the 1975 successful Joint Services expedition to climb Everest, the 1976 expedition to climb Nuptse and the 1992 unsuccessful British Army attempt to climb the west ridge of Everest. In 1992 the Regiment's detachment to the expedition was led by **Sergeant Rabin Gurung** and included **Sergeant**

Kharka Gurung, **Lance Corporals Chudakumar Gurung**, and **Tekraj Rai**. The Regiment has also carried out its own mountaineering expeditions notably to New Zealand.

In 1974 Turkey invaded Cyprus and 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles were despatched to defend the Sovereign base area of Dhekelia. 581 Battalion Signal Troop the rear link detachment to the battalion accompanied the Regiment on its year long tour. Unfortunately the Troop commander **Lieutenant John Wedgbury** had to remain in Church Crookham with the Officer Commanding Rear Party for 10 of those 12 months only reaching Cyprus for the very end of the tour. That same year the Regiment celebrated its 25th Anniversary year using the year 1949, when recruits first under went training, as the starting year for the Regiment. A parade was taken by **Major General EJS Burnett CBE, DSO, MC Major General Brigade of Gurkhas** on the 23rd September in Sek Kong Camp. A week long series of festivities followed the parade with numerous barbecues, cocktail parties, and families days.

Considerable reorganization became the most memorable events of 1976-1977. In 1976 248 Squadron moved from Sham Shui Po Camp to Gun Club Hill Barracks on 13th December, occupying Block 4 which became their home until 1993 when it was handed over to the Royal Hong Kong Police as a depot for their reserve units. From 1993 until 1994 the Squadron had to move into Block 2 before moving completely to Prince of Wales barracks on Hong Kong Island. The Squadron beat the Gurkha Transport Regiment into the camp by one month and left a month after the Queen's Own Gurkha Transport Regiment when that unit was absorbed into the Logistic Support Regiment based in Osborne Barracks in April 1994. 248 Squadron was forced to move out of Sham Shui Po camp because of the Hong Kong Defence Costs Agreement, which also disbanded 27 Signal Regiment and initiated the re-badging of all Signals personnel in the Far East to Gurkha Signals. The Regiment then became responsible for all Far East communications and the long haul Defence Communication Network (DCN) circuits to UK, Brunei, and Nepal.



1977 was a particularly joyous year for the Regiment because, as part of the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations, the Regiment regained its Royal title, along with the Gurkha Engineers, becoming Queen's Gurkha Signals. A submission had

been made by **Major General RWC McAllister QBE Major General Brigade of Gurkhas**, on behalf of both Regiments to gain the Royal title and on 20th April 1977 the titles were changed officially. The following message was sent by **Brigadier WPW Robertson CBE**, Honorary Colonel of Queen's Gurkha Signals, to commemorate this event;

'For CO and all ranks Queen's Gurkha Signals. This is a proud day. You now bear a Royal title as well as the Royal crown that you wear in your badge. Such honour is not bestowed lightly. You and your forebears have faithfully served the crown in Malaya, Hong Kong, Borneo, East Pakistan, the UK, Germany, Nepal and Cyprus. Many individuals have received personal recognition but none so great as that now bestowed upon all of you who follow in their footsteps. HF Radio and cable route are the communication tools of your forebears. You now work in a technological age. However you must in addition continue to uphold the martial traditions of the Brigade of Gurkhas. By your new name will you be known. By your ability will you be judged. I know you will not be found wanting. Go to It!'

The Regiment celebrated in true style with picnics, cocktail parties, and families barbeques, as well as the Re-badging parade held on the 21st September 1977 at Gun Club Hill Barracks.

The 1980's will be remembered for the hordes of Vietnamese boat people who descended upon Hong Kong and who were encamped on the runway of RAF Sek Kong outside the Regiment's Sergeants' Mess. They will also be remembered for the visit by **Her Royal Highness Princess Anne** on 30th April 1983. Her Royal Highness visited the Regiment for four hours on a glorious Saturday morning, thanks in no small part to some of the prayers from Regimental Pandit Babiram Dahal who cleared away the drizzle, and was shown around the various stands representing the Regiment by Commanding Officer **Lieutenant Colonel M J Lance**. A village house, a Linge Ping, and a Rote Ping had been built and accompanied by dancing from both the boys and the children provided a very festive occasion.

Exercises in and around Hong Kong occurred with frightening regularity, but occasionally a few exotic exercises were undertaken by the Regiment. In 1984 troop strength parties from the Regiment went to Exercise LIONHEART in Germany and Exercise REINDEER in Australia, and in 1985 Germany was revisited again for Exercise FLYING FALCON. **Lieutenant EA Davis** led a Troop of Gurkha Signals on the exercise and was attached to 1st Armed Division Headquarters and Signal Regiment commanded by **Lieutenant Colonel SMA Lee** and whose adjutant was **Captain IW Mackenzie**, both familiar faces to the Regiment. The exercise was a great chance for the boys to drive armoured vehicles and generally see a side to signalling they are denied in Hong Kong. They were not found wanting. This was the Regiment's first contact with PTARMIGAN which it would become much more intimate with later.

The 1990's could not have started better for the Regiment when on 1st June 1990 250 Gurkha Signal Squadron was reformed as part of 30 Signal Regiment in Blandford. A reformation parade was taken by the **Signal Officer-in-Chief (Army) Major General RFL Cook** and attended by many guests of the Regiment, the Squadron could not have been reformed in a more exciting and versatile unit. 30 Signal Regiment provides the Army's out of area signals capabilities and over the past few years has seen service in Namibia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Turkey, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Mozambique and Sierra Leone (to name only a few operations). Being part of 30 Signal Regiment was breaking new ground for the Gurkhas because 250 Squadron was the first of the Gurkha Brigade's Corps units to move to UK permanently and integrate with a British unit in preparation for 'Options for Change' and the eventual run down of the Gurkha Corps Regiments themselves. It also provided the opportunity to test the Regiment's ability in actual operations after an absence of 12 years.

In August 1990 30 Signal Regiment deployed to Saudi Arabia as part of the Allied response to Saddam Hussain's aggression in Kuwait. Elements of 250 Squadron deployed within 2 weeks to the Gulf area and **Sergeant Padambahadur Rai** had the honour of being the first Gurkha in the Gulf on 13th October 1990. Many more of the Squadron followed, as detachments were established in Riyadh, Tabuk, Muharraq, Dharan, Seeb, Al Jubayl, and Kuwait. In all 44 members of the fledgling Squadron deployed to the Gulf prior to the air war, some soldiers having served long enough there to be replaced on Roulement and then sent back. The men of 250 Squadron were not however the only soldiers of the Regiment to serve in the Gulf war. Twelve men deployed with 28 Squadron Gurkha Transport Regiment who were providing ambulance support for 1st UK Division. There was a requirement for radio operators with this squadron and so the Regiment stepped into the breach. Fortunately the war was resolved with few casualties but the Regiment had once again proven its worth and reconfirmed that its skills were not lost.

Whilst their fellow soldiers were in the Gulf the rest of 250 Squadron did not sit idly by. 16 men commanded by **Lieutenant (QGO) Dorje Tamang** accompanied **249 Signal Squadron (AMF(L))** on Exercise HARD FALL 91 in Norway. This Arctic survival exercise was to prove extremely testing to the men involved and new skills had to be learnt, such as cross country skiing, 'Pulk' pulling (sledges to the rest of us) and arctic survival techniques - especially those requiring them to jump into a frozen lake at -10 degrees Celsius, but the men emerged from the exercise unscathed and the Regiment was able to add to

its already great wealth of experience.

In 1992 the honour of providing the last Korean Honour Guard to be supplied by a British Army unit fell to the Regiment. The Guard, which is correctly titled the United Nations Platoon of the Honour Guard Company, conducts all the ceremonial duties of the United Nations on the North/South Korean border. The Regiment had first provided the guard in 1981 commanded by **Second Lieutenant DG Macauley**, and then subsequently in 1988 and 1991 commanded by **Lieutenant RCA Pool** and **Lieutenant Tim Smith** respectively. **Captain Bill Fathers** led the 1992 contingent and their tour was extended by a month and a half so that the final ceremonial duties could be conducted. It was a opportunity to visit a country not on the normal tourist agenda and was greatly sought by everyone in the Regiment and will consequently be sorely missed.



Another opportunity to visit pastures new was revived in 1993 when the Hong Kong to Beijing Rally was revived after a six year absence. This motor rally, covering 3900km, is probably one of the most gruelling in the World and had previously run between in 1983-1987. Queen's Gurkha Signals was approached in 1987 and in 1993 to provide the communications expertise on the rally. An 18 man contingent led by **Lieutenant James Anderson** and **Staff Sergeant (Foreman of Signals) Paul Cooper** entered China, and using a mixture of old commercial VHF radios and up to the minute satellite communications, successfully maintained communications throughout the rally. Other countries that were visited in 1993 include Belize by the rear link detachment of 2nd Gurkha Rifles and Chile by **Lieutenant Rob Chamberlain** OC C Troop 246 Gurkha Signal Squadron on Operation RALEIGH, whilst a detachment from

250 Squadron were on operations in Bosnia.

This history will end not with a look at the past but at a view of the future. Options for Change has radically reduced the size of the Brigade of Gurkhas and consequently the Corps units are beginning the reduction to achieve an establishment of just one squadron by 1997. Queen's Gurkha Signals begins its reductions in 1994 when 247 and 248 squadrons amalgamate into one, the Hong Kong Gurkha Signal Squadron, on 1 July 1994, to be based in the Prince of Wales Barracks (formerly Victoria barracks/HMS Tamar). 246 Squadron will reduce to a large troop strength and the RHQ will leave Sek Kong to travel down to Prince of Wales barracks but both these occurrences are at a date not known yet. In 1997 the Regiment will have just one Squadron, 250 Squadron, still with 30 Signal Regiment but now currently based in Bramcote, near Coventry. Hopefully this history will give an insight to the new comer about a Regiment that has led a very impressive life.