THE British Government still has the right to recruit Gurkhas from Nepal for service in Gurkha battalions in certain overseas stations. At the present time, eight Gurkha battalions are in existence, and they are grouped into an organisation known as the Brigade of Gurkhas. In some ways this formation is very similar to the Brigade of Guards.

Recruiting, to make good the normal wastage in these battalions, takes place once per year, usually in the month of November. The number to be recruited each year varies and depends on the number leaving the service, and for the year in question some 1,000 recruits were required. This demanded a considerable effort over a short period of time, to medically examine these recruits. The existing medical potential on the Gurkha L. of C. was, naturally, somewhat thin on the ground, and D.M.S., G.H.Q., Far East Land Forces, was requested by H.Q., British Gurkha Troops, India, to send temporary reinforcements to help out, the minimum requirement being two doctors. At the time medical officers were in short supply, but it is wonderful what astute administrative officers can contrive. At any rate, when asked if I could possibly leave my unit for approximately two and a half weeks in order to proceed by air to Nepal on temporary duty, I was determined that all obstacles could and should be overcome. “The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God” had already begun to exercise its spell.

Wednesday, 26th October, saw myself and another R.A.M.C. officer reporting at 0600 hours to the B.O.A.C. office in the new Singapore international airport of Paya Lebar, ready to take-off at 0700 hours. But it was not to be. A Burmese transit visa had been omitted from our passports, and B.O.A.C. could not accept us. Sadly we returned home and a hectic day followed. There were interviews with “Movements,” new plans made, new tickets obtained, all plans scrapped, a hasty dash to the Thai Embassy to obtain Thai visas and finally a new set of tickets issued.

Thursday, 27th October, saw us in the air by 0800 hours en route to Calcutta via Cathay Pacific Airlines. Midday saw us in Bangkok, where we were to stay overnight. The Airline provided us with extremely comfortable air-conditioned bedrooms in the Metropole Hotel, and all that prevented us from painting the town red was a lack of ticuls, the local currency. However, the hotel was able and willing to cash a traveller’s cheque so even that difficulty was overcome, in a modest way. At night the Oasis Club provided a mixture of jazz music as played by a Filipino band and an exhibition of classical Siamese dancing. But it must be admitted that the cost of living in Bangkok is high. British cars
still predominate on the streets, but in the shops American goods are well to the fore.

Friday, at 1330 hours, saw us once again in the air bound for Calcutta, our remaining ticuls having been expended during the morning shopping. We arrived at Calcutta about 2000 hours and were met by a representative of "Q" (Movements), who very expeditiously saw us through Customs and Immigration. Then followed a fifteen-mile car journey to the H.Q., Gurkha L. of C., at Barrackpore to the north of Calcutta.

Next day my co-traveller had an early-morning start to catch a plane en route to Jalapahar, north of Darjeeling. He was to help out with recruiting in the eastern zone of Nepal. I lingered on at Barrackpore until the evening of Sunday, 30th October, enjoying the hospitality, provided for the visiting Major-General, Brigade of Gurkhas. On Sunday evening I left Calcutta in an air-conditioned sleeper on my way to Lehra. On Monday afternoon I changed stations and trains at Lucknow and was lucky enough to obtain another air-conditioned compartment as far as Gorakhpur.

After a three-hour wait I caught a local train to Lehra. It left shortly after midnight, with myself in the one and only first-class compartment. The standard of comfort was perhaps not so high as previously, but it was a friendly train. It must have been, for it stopped very frequently at odd places while the driver and others in the train held long conversations with people at the side of the track. But there was now a definite nip in the air and that, coupled with my ignorance of the language, made me slightly impatient, until we arrived at Lehra Halt.

Gurkha Depot, Lehra, was finally reached about 0300 hours on Tuesday, 1st November; but my stay there was short. By 0900 hours I was on my way by Land-Rover to Paklihawa camp, the western zone recruiting base just inside Nepalese territory. The journey was rough, the roads practically non-existent, but each mile brought me nearer to the Himalayan foothills, with the majestic snow-capped peaks of Anapurna and Daulaghiri in the background.

My first sight of Paklihawa recruiting camp was, to say the least, arresting. It was a trim tented camp, set in an open grassy meadow or promontory, with the river on three sides. The area was dotted with shady trees. In the centre of the camp was a square "show-ring," and parading around it, dressed only in dhotis, was a long line of Gurkha recruits. In the middle were the "judges," the Chief Recruiting Officer (C.R.O.), the Deputy Recruiting Officer (D.R.O.), and Queen's Gurkha Officers (Q.G.Os.). As I watched, the parade broke into a trot and then a gallop. The similarity to a horse-show was unmistakable.

The C.R.O. hailed me off the Land-Rover, welcomed me briefly, and, pausing only while I grabbed stethoscope and tendon-hammer, I was conducted forthwith to the tented Medical Centre. A short chat with the S.M.O., Major Ian Scott, and then he and I were hard at it. From then on, until recruiting finished on Friday, 11th November, we ate, slept and talked recruits. For nine to ten hours per day, ten minutes per man, six men per hour, the work went on. At the end of the day came the signing up of the documents; for each man examined, three signatures were necessary, on the F. Med. 1, F. Med. 4 and the attestation form.
On our best (or worst) day we examined 112 recruits between us, a total of 336
signatures being necessary at the end of the day.

A word or two on the background of Gurkha recruiting at this stage is
probably necessary. The agreement with India stipulates that the recruitment,
medical examination and attestation of Gurkha recruits will take place on
Nepalese soil. Hence the need for recruiting camps at Paklihawa and Jalapahar.
Once recruited, they are dispatched down the L. of C. pipeline to the Depot at
Barrackpore and thence by ship to Malaya. No recruit training is allowed in
India; all basic training is done in Malaya at the Gurkha Training Depot, Sungei
Patani.

But the recruits have still to be brought to the recruiting camps. How is
this done? Gurkha recruiters, called gallawallahs, and usually old soldiers on
pension, are engaged to cover the areas concerned. Before the recruiting season
begins they are brought in to a central meeting-place, thoroughly briefed as to
the type and quality of recruits required, and instructed to bring in a certain
number of recruits, boys and adults, to reach the recruiting camp on a certain
date. The gallawallahs have a certain basic pay, but they are also paid by results—
viz., Rs8 per recruit accepted or Rs10 for an exceptionally good recruit, and
Rs3 per boy accepted or Rs5 for an exceptionally good boy recruit. So that the
incentive is there for the recruiter to produce good results. Boy recruits are
wanted at the age of 15 years (approximately) and soldier recruits at the age of
17 years (approximately). It is usually rather difficult to verify ages exactly.

Let us now follow a party of recruits through the recruiting mill, from start
to finish. They arrive at the recruiting camp, a long file of about thirty recruits,
headed by the gallawallah. They are tired and dusty, having been perhaps
ten to fourteen days on the march, perhaps all the way on foot or part of the way
by bus or train. After being allotted tented accommodation, they are shown
where the cookhouse is, told the times of meals and then allowed to settle in and
rest. Next day or the day after, this particular gala or party are called on to the
parade ground. There they are weighed and chest and height measurements
recorded, as well as name, age and other particulars. After that, clad only in a
dhoti, the "show-ground" parade already mentioned takes place. Races between
four and six recruits also take place, giving the D.R.O. time to study his material.

Next day the final selection is done. Six, eight, ten or more gallas are
assembled on the parade ground, each individual in each party being inspected
by the D.R.O. accompanied by Q.G.Os. He speaks to each man in Gurkhali,
in an effort to assess intelligence. Not a very scientific method, as each man is
scared stiff anyway that he will not be accepted. At this time more data are
available—viz., height, weight, age and chest expansion. Any recruit not con-
forming to the minimum standards laid down is now eliminated, as well as those
with the more obvious degrees of knock-knee, bow legs and other structural
peculiarities. In this connection I have been told by experienced Gurkha officers
that a slight degree of bowing is a good thing, such men being better weight-
carriers than the straight-limbed variety. I think it is probably true, and having
seen the Gurkha in his own country carrying enormous loads (up to 160 lb.)
Some Aspects, Mainly Medical, of Gurkha Recruiting Season, 1955

along the mountain passes back to his village, I have nothing but admiration for his stamina and load-carrying capacity. During this parade ground inspection some 30 to 35 per cent of recruits are rejected, many for reasons which I could not appreciate. But recruits were plentiful and the selectors had long experience of Gurkha troops.

After being accepted by the D.R.O., the recruits then came within the medical orbit for the first time. They paraded behind the medical treatment tent, where they had their vision tested, and also produced a urine sample for testing. After this had been done they formed up behind the medical examination tent.

The medical examination carried out was of the usual routine type and needs no special description. Ten minutes per man was the average time spent, but it must be remembered that I spoke no Gurkhal and they spoke no English. In self-defence I soon mastered a few words—“Uthnu” meant “get up,” and a few more. However, the main medium was sign language, and if I wanted a man to touch his toes or bend his knees, I had to show him. By the end of the day I felt exhausted, mentally and physically.

Here are a few of my impressions of these recruits, for what they are worth. They were a very fit bunch—they had to be to march for ten to fourteen days through the Nepalese mountains to reach the Recruiting Centre. They had a good physique and were well developed and nourished. I could detect no signs of malnutrition, except perhaps a certain rough feeling in the quality of the skin of certain of them. The appearance and feel of the skin certainly made me think of pelle agra (rough skin), but there were no other signs or symptoms. If time had permitted, it might have been possible through an interpreter to find out something about their diet, and whether they were predominantly rice or maize eaters.

Their dental condition was remarkably good. I understand that they use the twigs from a certain tree to scrub their teeth. In a few of them the second molar tooth on both sides, usually on the lower jaw, was almost completely destroyed. Questioning elicited the information that these people were in the habit of taking a pocketful of whole maize kernels with them to work. They chewed the kernels during the day and they attributed the poor condition of their molar teeth to the effect of cracking hard maize kernels. In other recruits the molar teeth were found to be worn down and quite smooth on the upper chewing surface. It was thought that this was due to the admixture of grit particles with the food, due to the use of primitive stone mills for grinding maize.

In examining the eyes, the lids were everted in a search for cases of trachoma. In all, about a dozen such cases were found and their names noted for placing under treatment. I can only remember two cases who failed on account of poor vision. In one galla of recruits it was noted that in many of them the skin junction at the inner canthus of the eyes was tight and protruded over the medial aspect of the eyes. In one extreme case this caused inversion of the eyelids and chronic conjunctival irritation. This condition was not due to trachoma, but it was considered that it could be relieved by a fairly simple plastic operation.

Ears were examined very carefully, as it was found that perforated drums and chronic otitis media were the most common cause of rejection of
recruits. Some 1.5 to 2 per cent were probably rejected on those grounds. Wax in the ears was extremely common and tended to cause delays in the medical examination, while ears were being syringed or, in the more extreme cases, the wax removed manually under direct vision, using a head lamp. Rice grains, grass seeds and other curiosities were removed from various ears, to the wonderment and often patent disbelief of the owners.

Chest examination usually did not prove to be very illuminating. Since the whole camp was suffering from a type of common cold, rhonchi were often heard and were not considered a cause for rejection. Illness in a recruit, unless extreme, was never disclosed until after he had been accepted or rejected. It was common to find a recruit coming up for medical examination with a burning skin, and on taking his temperature it would be found to be 102°-103° F.

Cardiac examination did produce about four cases of heart disease, either congenital or acquired. Most of them were well compensated—after all, they had to march for ten to fourteen days to reach the camp—but with recruits plentiful it was not considered justifiable to enlist them.

Abdominal examination was almost uniformly negative. A few cases of palpable spleen were encountered, but this was not considered to be a cause for rejection, since malaria was the most likely cause. Palpable spleens, due to malaria, are more commonly found amongst recruits from the eastern regions of Nepal. It was also found that certain recruits from the eastern border of the western recruiting area had an abnormally wide sternal angle. If examined carefully, the liver could be palpated in practically every case. Once again this was not considered to be a cause for rejection.

Although I have no exact figures for medical rejects, my general impression, based on recruiting in the western zone only, is that it was about 2 to 2.5 per cent, made up largely of ear conditions with cardiac abnormalities, poor vision and postural deformities such as knock-knee, etc., making up the remainder. Once the recruits reached the Depot at Lehra, they were sent in batches to Gorakhpur for M.M.R. examination. I did not hear the full result of this, but from past experience abnormal chest radiographs usually accounted for a further 1 to 5.5 per cent of rejects. I was told of one case from this year’s recruits in whom the M.M.R. examination had shown the presence of a hydatid cyst.

From Tuesday, 1st November to Friday, 11th November, in all ten working days, approximately 640 recruits were accepted for military service. The main fighting clans were well represented, and surnames such as Gurung, Rai, Thapa, Pun and Limbu were as common as MacDonald, MacKenzie or Maclean might be in certain parts of Scotland. In addition to recruits from the fighting clans, a small number of the traditional tradesmen were also enlisted to meet the requirements of the battalions, and surnames such as Sarki (bootmaker), Kami (blacksmith) or Damai (tailor) were occasionally met.

After the recruits have been finally accepted by all concerned and enlistment documentation is complete, there comes the rather colourful ceremony of “taking the oath” and “touching the flag.” The recruits, by this time rigged out in a uniform of sorts—and very proud they are of it too—form up in a huge horse-
Some Aspects, Mainly Medical, of Gurkha Recruiting Season, 1955

152

shoe-shaped formation. At the open end of the horse-shoe is a table with the Union Jack spread on it and the officer in charge of the parade standing behind. A Q.G.O. goes forward in front of the table and slowly reads the oath of allegiance, while the recruits, perhaps some seventy strong, chant the phrases in unison as he reads. Somehow it seems to be so much more significant, taking the oath in this magnificent setting on Nepalese soil with the majestic, snow-capped peak of Anapurna in the background to bear witness to their testimony.* After the oath the recruits come forward, six at a time, range themselves in front of the table, salute, touch the flag, salute, do a smart left turn and march off. Some of their salutes, although they have as yet had no training, would do credit to a guardsman. For indeed the military tradition runs strong in most of their families.

A few words might be said regarding the allocation of recruits to their respective battalions or units. In general, recruits from Western Nepal go to the 2nd and 6th Battalions respectively, while recruits from Eastern Nepal go to the 7th and 10th Battalions. Recruits with a family allegiance, either a father or a brother in one of the battalions, can state his preference for this battalion and is usually allocated to it. Recruits with no family ties or preferences are allocated as required, either to one of the battalions or to the Royal Engineers or Royal Signals.

No mention has yet been made of the lighter side of camp life. The camp was very comfortable, with one E.P.I.P. tent per officer as sleeping quarters, furnished with bed, table, bedside locker, chest-of-drawers and the usual camp washing facilities. A large marquee served as a mess, with lounge chairs and small tables at one end and the dining-table at the other. Gurkha mess servants provided admirable attention, although language difficulties made it a bit difficult from my point of view. However, I soon managed to say ghusl pani to indicate that I wished my bath to be prepared. "Whisky-soda" seems to be universally understood.

To begin with the meal situation struck me as being rather peculiar. Reveille was at 0630, but when I had dressed and presented myself at the mess tent in search of breakfast the mess waiter looked at me rather queerly. It was finally broken to me gently that breakfast was at 0930 hours, after two and a half hours' work on an empty stomach. But it was worth waiting for when it did come, as it usually consisted of about four courses. Lunch was at 1400 hours and dinner any time up to 2200 hours. Food was purchased mainly through a local contractor, and mutton in various forms was the usual main course. A loaf of bread occasionally arrived up from Lehra, but chapatties were usually served in lieu. The diet was certainly adequate.

At night the camp throbbed to the beat of the local type of drum, called a madal, and this was accompanied by singing and dancing. During the evening we

*Oath to be taken by recruits on enlistment. We swear by Almighty God that we will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors, and that we will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully serve in Her Majesty's Forces and go wherever we may be ordered, by air, land, or sea, and that we will observe and obey all commands by any officer set over us, even to the peril of our lives.
usually went down to the recruits’ tent lines and looked in on some of the song and
dance parties. This is usually called a jhamre. One, two or three people might
be dancing to the accompaniment of drums and voices. The steps of the dance
were set and traditional, but the vocal chant varied. One song which I rather
liked described a spider spinning its web, and there were two other attractive
numbers of which I was not able to get the translations. One of these I called
“Saturday Night” and the other “L’amour.” Phonetically and musically, my
translation should not be far out.

While I was at Paklihawa, the camp was visited by General Anderson,
Major-General, Brigade of Gurkhas, and Brigadier Graham, O.C. British
Gurkha Troops, India. Lieut.-Colonel Murray, Gurkha Liaison Officer, War
Office, was also in the party. Such a visitation, of course, demanded a nautch,
and this was duly arranged and presented. It was my first experience of a Gurkha
nautch and Gurkha rum. I am glad to say I enjoyed them both. The dancing
and singing were, in my opinion, very akin to the Gaelic dancing and singing
in my own country. I felt quite at home and indeed the Campbeltown Gaelic
choir would not have been out of place at this assembly. The resemblance was
heightened when three Gurkha pipe-majors gave a selection on the bagpipes,
followed by a very expert sword dance performed by four Gurkha boys in full
regalia. The nautch is an all-male performance, but certain dancers dress in
female garb and dance the part of the women. In their female dress with all
its finery these marunis looked very fetching. In all, a very pleasant evening.

Sunday, 6th November, was declared a holiday and recruiting stopped for the
day. I managed to tack myself on to a picnic party arranged for the visiting
celebrities. We went by Land-Rover as far as Badole in the foothills and pic-
nicked on the steep side of a gorge, perched high above a fast-flowing river
which issued from the hills. While we ate our sandwiches and drank our beer,
we heard a dull boom up the gorge and then saw a party of Nepalese spread out
across the river and start throwing fish on to the banks. Evidently they believed
in fishing the modern way. After lunch we went down to the river and joined
them, and after some parley it was agreed that they would throw a bomb for us
for the sum of Rs6. This was duly done, with very satisfactory results. But it
would take a better pen than mine to express the delight of these people at seeing
two very high-ranking British officers (who shall be nameless), accompanied by
my humble self, all attired briefly in underpants, waist-deep in the water and
grappling gamely with slippery fish in that fast-flowing water. Of course, they
helped us, and some thirty edible fish (about three or four to the pound) were
eventually secured.

The fish were of two types, a large-scaled variety which we thought might be
young mahseer, and a beautifully shaped fish which I thought might be blue-
trout. At the finish, photographs were taken, with the senior officer holding a
bamboo pole over one shoulder and a string of fish dangling from the other
hand. The mess certainly appreciated the addition of fresh fish to the menu.

I could write much in similar vein, but space and time forbids. I will only
mention briefly the occasional visits to our mess of the Governor or Bara Hakim
of the local district in which our camp was situated. He is an old ex-Q.G.O. whom certain people may recognize under his initials of N. B. G.—a most vivacious old gentleman who in his time had visited London. Unfortunately he spoke only in Gurkhali, so I was unable to follow his discourse, apart from such words as Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly Circus and Windmill Theatre.

On Sunday, 13th November, I left Paklihawa by Land-Rover for Lehra. On Monday, the 14th, I went by road from Lehra to Gorakhpur, passing through the beautiful and well-kept Indian State Forests in that region. At Gorakhpur aerodrome, after a cup of tea with the officers of an Indian Engineer T.A. battalion who were “brewing-up” there while on a route march, I flew by Indian Airlines Dakota to Calcutta. On the 17th, after the plane had been delayed for twenty-four hours, I flew by B.O.A.C. (tourist and very crowded) from Calcutta to Singapore, arriving at Paya Lebar on 18th November, at 0600 hours. My Indian-Nepalese trip had ended. I thoroughly enjoyed it.