

The Victoria Cross and the Nepali Gurkhas

—Prem Uprety

The British had the habit of classifying people into neat little categories. Accordingly, they attributed the label of martial race to certain nationalities and classes of the subcontinent like Gurkhas, Sikhs and the Jats. Their favourite was of course the Gurkhas of Nepal whom they were proud to call “the bravest of the braves”, “the soldier of the soldiers.”¹ If any regiment in the British or the British Indian army identified themselves with the Victoria cross it was the Gurkha regiment. If the number of Victoria Crosses is to be used as a yardstick to measure the triumph of a regiment which “knows the beauty of existence”² then the Gurkhas sewed it up in battles which will always remain a classic triumph and tragedy. The Gurkhas bagged five Victoria Crosses in the Great War (1914–1918),³ Kulbir Thapa of the 2/3 Queen Alexandra’s Own Gurkha Rifle was the first Gurkha and the second among the non-British ranks to receive the Victoria Cross.

The *London Gazette* of November 18, 1915 announced the award of the Victoria Cross to No. 2129, Rifleman, Kulbir Thapa and gave the specific reason for it which ran—

For the most conspicuous bravery during operations against the German trenches south of Maquissart, when himself badly wounded on September 25th, 1915, he found a badly wounded soldier of the 2nd Leicester Regiment behind the first German trench, and although urged by the British officer to save himself, he remained with him all day and night. In the early morning of 26th September, in the misty weather he brought him out through the German wire, and leaving him in a place of comparative safety, returned and brought in two wounded Gurkhas, one after the other. He then went back in broad daylight for the British soldier and brought him in also, carrying him most of the way, and being at most points under enemy’s fire.³

1. Speech by Sir John French at Nauve Chapelle, *Civil and Military Gazette*, June 3, 1915, p. 1, William Willcocks points out in 1915 that “I have now come to the conclusion that the best of my troops in France were the Gurkhas.” *Civil and Military Gazette*, June 3, 1915, p. 2.
2. See *Times*, October 23, 1915, p. 1, also *New Castle Journal*, October 23, 1915, p. 3.
3. *London Gazette*, November 18, 1915.

The Gurkhas received ten Victoria Crosses in World War II (1938-45) of which as many as seven were awarded in the Eastern Front. A record that still may stay inviolate in the annals of Military History. Whether in the heat of the African desert, or the frost bite of the French or Italian winter or in the humidity of the marshy jungles of Burma the Gurkhas lived by the dictum "*Kafar hunne bhanda marnu ramro*" (better to die than be a coward). It was their saga of sacrifice and heroism that made the name Gurkhas synonymous with fearlessness and unflinching devotion to duty. A countless number of headless Japanese and the Germans bare a mute testimony to this fact.

Historical antecedents

The Victoria Cross Warrants has a very interesting history. The medal Victoria Cross was instituted by Queen Victoria in the nineteenth year of her reign, corresponding to the year 1856 of the Christian calendar. The Warrants is divided into fifteen clauses, which details the procedure and the methods of this award- the honor of supreme military distinction. It was to be awarded to men all ranks from the soldiers to the officers of the military and the navy. The medal consisted of the Maltse cross of bronze Royal Crest at the center and underneath was an escroll bearing an inscription "For Valour". The queen hoped that the medal would be "highly prized and eagerly sought by men and officers of

naval and military services."⁴ The medal was to be awarded to single acts of bravery or devotion to the country. The importance of the award is further reflected by the fact that the award was to be published in the Official *London Gazette* with a full citation of the act of valour. The person who was to be awarded the medal was also entitled to a pension of ten pounds a year.⁵

The Victoria Cross is still a highly coveted award to a Nepali serving in the Gurkha regiments of the British army. No one can deny that the Victoria Cross does have intrinsic value but the cost for 15 victoria crosses she received in the two World Wars was also great. Approximately 24,000 Gurkhas were killed, wounded or missing in action in World War II. About 20,000 were killed, wounded or missing in action in World War I.⁶ Many are the tales that the Nepali people tell of the Gurkha soldier's who were permanently blinded or paralyzed during the World Wars. A little over a dozen Victoria Crosses could hardly compensate such colossal losses during the two wars. The Nepali Gurkhas during both the wars were told that the Germans were their enemies and in the World War II the Japanese were added to the list. But they were living in an world of myth and illusions. It is true that myths and illusions do have their own charms; but truth is far more beautiful than myths and illusions. The Germans and the Japanese were not the

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4. See clause One of the Victoria Cross Warrants in Colonel Rupert Stewart (Comp.) *The Victoria Cross : The Emperor's Scroll of Valour* (London, Hutchison & Co., 1928), p. 469.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Prem R. Uprety, *Nepal : A Small Nation in the Vortex of International Conflicts, 1900-1950* (Kathmandu : Pugo Mi, 1984), p. 90, 236.

traditional enemies of the Nepalese nor were the English their native friends. They fought for a cause they did not know and; and they sacrificed their precious lives for reasons they never understood. A Gurkha soldier who was questioned in the front by Ian Hamilton to what the cause of World War I replied with his usual characteristic smile in a simplistic manner : "the German king had been rude to the British king."⁷ He could not perceive the intricacies of the war nor could he even dream to fathom into the deep crisis in values that was rooted into the European civilization.⁸

Since the Victoria Crosses were awarded for single acts of bravery it would not be out of place to examine a few citations for the award of the Victoria crosses. Two posthumous and two other citations are given so that Nepalese today can get some feeling about the dangerous situation their bretheren, the Gurkhas, had to go through to earn the highly coveted award.

A. Citations of the Posthumous Awards of the Victoria Crosses.*

- i) Citation in respect of the posthumous award of Victoria Cross to *Jemadar*, Netra Bahadur Thapa, Second Batallion of the Fifth Gurkha Rifles.

In Burma on the 25th June 1944, Subedar Netra Bahadur Thapa was commanding a garrison of 41 men of the 5th Royal Gurkha

Rifles which took over an isolated picquet known as the Mortar Bluff on the hill-side commanding the base at Bishenpur. It was over-run by strong enemy forces on the previous night; and was still on the enemy hands. retention of the Mortar Bluff was vital to the safety of other positions further down the ridge and to Bishenpur itself. When the enemy began to attack, 75 men and 37 mm guns were brought to the high ground overlooking the position pouring shells at point blank range for ten minutes into the narrow confines of the picquet. This was followed by determined attacks by a company of Japanese when fierce fighting ensued in which Netra Bahadur's men, exhorted by their leader, held their ground against heavy odds and drove the enemy back with disproportionate loss. During this time, Netra Bahadur with tireless energy and contempt for danger, moved from post to post, encouraging the young NCOs and riflemen of which the garrison was largely composed, and tending the wounded. Under the cover of pitch dark night and torrential rain, the enemy then moved round to the jungle, from the cover of which they launched their attack. Still in considerable strength and as determined as ferocious as ever, the enemy poured out of the jungle across the short space of open ground to the picquet defences under cover of small arms and 37 mm gun-fire from

7. *Evening Standard*, "The innocent Remark of a Gurkha in the Front", July 5, 1915, p. 6.

8. For an excellent account of the role of cultural values in the rise and fall of civilizations see the following works of Arnold Toynbee : *A Study on Civilizations*, Vols. II-X abridged by D. C. Somerville (London : Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 350-393; *Civilization on Trial* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 150-51; *War and Civilization* (ed.), A. V. Fowler (London : Oxford University Press), 1951, pp. 143-65.

* For citations of the Awards see No. 2 *Poka* No. 155, File No. 615, 2000/1943, Archives Foreign Ministry, HMG, Kathmandu.

a flank. With much reduced firepower one section was unable to hold on and enemy forced an entrance and overran this and another section, killing and wounding 12 out of the 16 men comprising the two sections. Having no reserves Netra Bahadur himself went forward and stemmed any further advance with grenades. The situation was, however, now critical. With ammunition low, and the enemy in possession of a part of the perimeter, Netra Bahadur would have been perfectly justified in withdrawing, but so efficient were his plans for defence and such was the fine example of this gallant Gurkha officer that not a man moved from his trench and not a yard more was gained by the enemy despite attempts. Thus, the night passed until 0400 hours. A section of 8 men with grenades and S. A. A arrived. This inevitability drew the enemy's fire and all 8 were soon casualties. Undismayed, however, Netra Bahadur retrieved ammunition and himself took the offensive armed with grenades and also Khukuri. While so doing received a bullet wound in the mouth and his death followed shortly afterwards, with a khukuri in hand and a dead Japanese with a cleft of skull at his side. True to the traditions of his service and his race, Subedar Netra Bahadur Thapa fought against overwhelming odds for eight hours before he was killed. His fine example of personal bravery and his high sense of duty so inspired his men that a vital position was held to the limit of human endurance. His valour and devotion to duty will remain an epic in the history of the regiment.

- ii) Citation in respect to the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to 55537 Rifleman Thanman Gurung of the First Bn., 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (F. F.).

In Italy on the 10th November 1944,

a company of the 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles was ordered to send a fighting patrol on to Monte San Bartolo, an objective of future attack. In this patrol were two scouts, one of whom was Rifleman Thanman Gurung. By skilful staking, both succeeded in reaching the base of the position undetected. Rifleman Thanman Gurung then started to work his way to the summit but suddenly the second scout attracted his attention to the Germans located in a slit trench just below the plateau who were preparing to fire with machine guns at the leading section. Realizing that if the enemy succeeded in opening fire the section would have certainly sustained heavy casualties. Rifleman Thanman Gurung leapt to his feet and charged them. Completely taken by surprise the Germans surrendered without opening fire. Rifleman Thanman Gurung then crept forward to the summit of the position from which he saw the Germans well dug in the reverse slope preparing to throw grenades over the crest at the leading section. Although the interception line was devoid of cover and under accurate machine gun fire at close range, Rifleman Thanman Gurung immediately crossed it, firing on the German position with his Tommy Gun, thus allowing the forward section to reach there. Due to heavy fire from enemy machine guns, however, the platoon was asked to withdraw. Rifleman Thanman Gurung then again crossed the sky-line alone, and, although in full view of the enemy and constantly exposed to heavy fire at short range, he methodically put burst after burst of fire from his Tommy Gun into the German slit trench till his ammunition ran out. He then threw two grenades he had with him, and, rejoining his section, collected two more grenades and again struggled over the bullet swept crest of the hillock and hurled them at

the remaining Germans. His diversions enabled both the rear sections to withdraw without further losses. Meanwhile, the leading section which had remained behind to assist the withdrawal of the remainder of the platoon was still on the summit, so Rifleman Thanman Gurung, shouting to the section to withdraw, seized a Bren Gun and a number of mazzazines. He then yet again ran to the top of the hill and, although he well knew his action meant almost certain death, stood up on the bullet swept summit in full view of the enemy and opened fire at the nearest enemy positions. It was not until he emptied two complete mazzazines and the remaining section was well on its way to safety that Rifleman Thanman Gurung was killed. It was undoubtedly due to Rifleman Thanman Gurung's superb gallantry and the sacrifice of his life that his platoon was able to withdraw from an extremely difficult position without many more casualties than they were actually incurred, and stores of ammunition and information were brought by the platoon. This resulted in the Monte San Batrolo feature being captured three days later.

B. Citations for 'Regular' Award of the Victoria Crosses.

- i) Citation in respect of the award of Victoria Cross to No. 87726 Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung of the 2nd Bn. 8th Gurkha Rifles.

At Taungdaw in Burma on the west bank of Irrawady on the night of 12/13 May 1945, Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung was manning the most forward post of his platoon. At 0120 hours at least 200 enemy assaulted the company position. The burst of the attack was borne by Lachhiman Gurung's section and by his own post in particular. This post dominated a jungle path leading up into the

platoon locality. Before assaulting, the enemy hurled innumerable grenades at the position from close range. One grenade fell on the lip of Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung's trench. He at once grasped it and hurled it back at the enemy. Almost immediately another grenade fell directly inside the trench and again this Rifleman snatched it up and threw it back. A third grenade then fell just in front of the trench. He attempted to throw it back, but it exploded in his hand blowing off his fingers, shattering his right arm and severely wounding him in the face, body and his right leg. His two comrades were also badly wounded and lay helpless at the bottom of the trench. The enemy, screaming and shouting, now formed up shoulder to shoulder and attempted to rush the position by their sheer numbers. Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung regardless of his wounds, loaded his rifle with his left hand, maintaining a continuous and steady rate of fire. Wave after wave of fanatical attacks were thrown in by the enemy but all were repulsed with heavy casualties. For four hours after being severely wounded, Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung remained alone at his post waiting with perfect calm for each attack, meeting it with fire at point blank range from his rifle, determined not to give one inch of ground. Of the 87 dead counted in the immediate vicinity of the company's locality, 31 lay in front of the Rifleman's section, the key to the whole position. Had the enemy succeeded in over-running and occupying Rifleman Lachhiman Gurung's trench, the whole of the reverse slope would have been completely dominated and turned. This Rifleman, by his magnificent example, so inspired his comrades to resist the enemy to the last that although surrounded and cut off for three days and two nights, they held and smashed every attack.

His gallant and extreme devotion to duty in the face of almost overwhelming odds were the main feature in the defeat of the enemy.

- ii) Citation in respect to the award of Victoria Cross to Havaldar Gaje Ghale of the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles.

To stop the advance into Chin Hills of the greatly superior Japanese forces, it was essential to capture Basha East Hill which was the key to the enemy position. Two assaults had failed but a third assault by the two platoons of Havaldar Gaje Ghale's Company and two companies of another battalion was ordered. This N. C. O. commanded one platoon, he had never been under fire before and his platoon consisted of young soldiers.

The approach for the platoon to fulfill the objective was along a narrow knife-edge with precipitous sides and bare jungle; whereas the enemy was well concealed. In places, the approach was no more than 5 yards wide and was covered by a dozen of enemy machine guns and subjected to artillery and mortar fire from the reverse slope.

While preparing to attack, the platoon came under heavy mortar fire, but Havaldar Gaje Ghale rallied them and led them forward. Approaching to close range, the platoon came under gathering fire from a well-trenched platoon and this N. C. O. was wounded in the arm, chest and legs by an enemy hand grenade. Without pausing to attend to his serious wounds and with no heed to intensive fire from all sides, Havaldar Gaje Ghale closed with his men and led them to close grips with the enemy when bitter hand-to-hand struggle ensued. The Havaldar dominated the fight by his outstanding example, dauntless courage

and superb leadership. Hurling hand grenade and covered in blood from his neglected wounds, he led assault after assault, encouraging his platoon by shouting the Gurkha battle cry "Ayo Gurkhali" (The Gurkhas are upon you!). Spurred on by the irresistible will of their leader to win, the platoon stormed and carried the hill by a magnificent all-out effort and inflicted very heavy casualties upon the Japanese. The Havaldar then held and consolidated the hard-won position under heavy fire. It was only when consolidation was well in hand that he went, refusing all help, to the regimental aid post, and then only when ordered to do so by an officer.

The courage, determination, and leadership of this N. C. O. under trying conditions are beyond all praise.

Conclusions

The Gurkhas of the British army even today love to identify themselves with the Victoria Cross. This bronze medal, though of little face-value, yet, what it means in the world of honor is beyond description. It is something to feel and not to tell. But on the other hand the story of the Victoria Crosses has left many soul-searching questions behind. They relate to the questions of recruitment, national honor and integrity. Nepal is the only country left in the last quarter of the twentieth century that is not only providing mercenaries for foreign armies but also providing them centers of recruitment in her own soil. The age old tradition of sending mercenaries abroad, though could be defended economically as it has been done by every government of Nepal since the first quarter of the nineteenth century; but it has also led to a dramatic erosion of the loss of honor and

self-respect among the Nepali patriots, politicians and social workers. Whenever there is a physical conflict in the world whether in India, Sri Lanka or the Falkland a cold wave of anguish and fear rushes into the hearths (*agenos*) of the Nepalese as the house-wives begin to count the number of Gurkha casualties. Today no Nepali would deny the fact that the whole process of Gurkha recruitment has brought the question of national honor at a stake. The Nepali intelligentsia as well as the Government of Nepal are both aware of this fact. But nothing is being done to reverse this trend.