

GURKHA DUTY – by Martin Staudinger, Profil Magazin, Austria, 17 November 2014

A unique photo book shows the life, deployments and culture of the legendary Nepalese fighters who put their lives on the line for the British Crown. Austrian photographer Alex Schlacher was the first person to be granted unlimited access to the elite brigade.

There are two prerequisites to becoming a Gurkha: you have to be a man and you have to be Nepalese. The British Army's legendary elite force does not admit anyone else.

Except Alex Schlacher.

The Austrian photographer spent the last three years with the Gurkhas – albeit not as a soldier. For the first time in 200 years, a photographer (female and a civilian), was allowed to accompany the Gurkhas around the world in order to document their recruitment, training, service and culture: from the battlefields of Afghanistan to the jungles of Brunei, the deserts of Kenya and the mountains of Nepal.

Since 1815, the Gurkhas have served as a kind of foreign legion to Great Britain. When the British sent their East India Company in to take Nepal, they were met with fierce resistance. Horrified as well as impressed with the strength and demeanor of the local fighters, the European invaders began to recruit their adversaries.

The number of Gurkhas that have served the British Crown over the centuries counts over a million. In World War I, 200.000 of them fought at the front line, in World War II it was more than 250.000.

Even now, around 25.000 young Nepalese men apply to join the British Gurkhas every year and only around 130 are accepted.

In the recent past, Gurkhas served in the Falklands as well as in Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Libya, the Congo, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. It was there, in the Helmand Province, a particularly embattled and inhospitable part of the country, that Alex Schlacher met the Gurkhas. Schlacher, a freelance photographer, was embedded with the US Marines at the time – a contact she developed during a project on law enforcement in the United States. While staying at a forward operating base, she got to know the Gurkha regiment that was stationed there and subsequently was virtually adopted by the Nepalese warriors.

It's the contrast between the Gurkhas' tough fighting power and their gentle, generous spirit that fascinated Alex Schlacher the most: "They are the nicest, most welcoming people you'll ever meet, so it's not immediately apparent that in battle, they turn into the fiercest, most incredible fighting machines", she says.

During the Afghanistan deployment, the idea for a photo book emerged – a document showing every stage of a Gurkha career from recruitment to retirement, a first in the Brigade's 200-year history.

The book is also something that very notably distinguishes itself from the usual old-fashioned military battle play-by-play on offer. There are action pictures in *Arc of the Gurkha*, but many of the images are touching and sensitive portrait shots of individual soldiers.

For her project, Alex Schlacher had to overcome a variety of obstacles. In order to keep up with the elite soldiers in extreme heat, tropical humidity and thin mountain air, she subjected herself to a rigorous fitness program, upon completion of which she would be able to pass even the Brigade's hardest qualifying exam: the so-called Doko Race – 4 kilometers uphill without a break, carrying a heavy bag of sand.

Arc of the Gurkha is published in London at the beginning of December. The cover image shows Lieutenant Manjung Gurung, 94 years old, who joined the army in 1938 and fought in World War II. His face is not just a reminder of a great past, but also of a long-lasting injustice: for most of their 200-year service, retired Gurkha veterans received a pension worth a fraction of their British colleagues. They were also not allowed to settle in the UK.

This has only been remedied fairly recently but today, Gurkha soldiers are finally treated equally to their British colleagues – almost 200 years after the first Nepalese warrior risked his life for Britain.