

# Findings from the HEAR study: Gurkha physical and mental health

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## The Gurkha contribution

As the statue opposite the Ministry of Defence records, Gurkha regiments have fought alongside UK armed forces since 1816, including both World Wars and the majority of post-1945 operational tours. It is a long and sustained record of professional military service. The statue also bears the words of Captain Ralph Turner, MC, “The Gurkha soldier, Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you”. Captain Turner served as Adjutant of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 3rd Gurkha Rifles in Palestine during World War One.

John Morris (1960), *Hired to Kill*, London: Rupert Hart- Davis, 59, 61.



## Gurkha military professionalism

Captain William Slim was so impressed by the determination and professionalism of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles at Gallipoli in 1915 that he applied to join the regiment in 1919 and subsequently commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles. As Lt General Slim, commanding the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in Burma, he relied on Gurkhas in key battles such as Kohima and Imphal. Slim described a frontal assault by 30 Gurkhas of the 7<sup>th</sup> Rifles on concealed Japanese bunkers at Meiktila as “one of the neatest, most workmanlike bits of infantry... tactics I had ever seen”.

Field Marshall Viscount Slim (1956), *Defeat into Victory*, London: Cassell, 513-15.



### **Contribution of Folkestone Nepalese Community**

The study involved the interview of 25 Gurkha veterans and 14 Fijian veterans. Of these, 22 Gurkhas were members of the Folkestone Nepalese Community, representing 56.4% of the total participants. We are very grateful for your contribution in terms of your time, your experiences, the gift of translators and a friendly place to conduct the research.



### **Feedback on the study**

Professor Trudie Chalder wrote on 27 February 2025 in an email, “This is without doubt the most powerful qualitative research I have ever read. What comes over for me is the strength of the Gurkha veterans; they can hold their heads up high and feel proud and privileged themselves”. Kirsteen Waller of Forces in Mind Trust, who funded the project, wrote on 13 March, “thank you for this excellent report”.



## **Participants**

25 Gurkha and 14 Fijian veterans

Tri-service but mainly Army

Mainly men, aged between 30s and 80s

Ranks ranged from private to major

Roles varied, including riflemen, signals, logistics, military police, administrative roles

Range of experiences in-service

Combat and counter-insurgency operations: Malaya, Brunei, Borneo, Malay Peninsula, Falklands, Gulf War, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan

# Themes

**Injustices and  
discrimination in  
service**

**Military pride and  
achievements**

**The toll of family  
separation**

**Creating a life in the  
UK**

**Coping with hardship**

**Being heard**

## **Service pensions**

The issue mentioned by many participants and caused the greatest concern was that of service pensions. As one Gurkha veteran observed, “we are not asking for special treatment, we just want to be given the same pension as a British soldier of the same rank and length of service”. When serving Gurkhas were given pension parity in 2007, it remained the case that Gurkha veterans who served in the UK armed forces before 1997 continued to receive a pension of between 23% and 36% of the value of that paid to an equivalent British veteran, depending on their rank. The lower settlement was justified by a pension which began at a younger age (typically 33 or 35 years versus 60 years for UK veterans) and the assumption that Gurkha veterans would return to Nepal on completing their military service where the cost of living was lower.



However, the pension issue became significant in 2009 when the UK Government permitted Gurkha veterans who had served before 1997 to apply for indefinite leave to enter the UK. Many then brought their families to Britain where they experienced financial hardship. Despite an on-going campaign (including hunger strikes in 2013 and 2021) driven by a deep sense of unfairness, the last review of 2023 did not recommended change.



### **Citizenship after military service**

Gurkhas and Commonwealth soldiers face financial barriers to citizenship on completion of their military service. The 'right to remain' applications cost £2,885 for each person, so that a soldier with a wife and two children will have to pay a total of £11,540. A minimum of four years service is a requirement unless the soldier is medically discharged for an injury or illness attributed to their military role. Gurkha personnel are not able to apply for ILR until 18 weeks before discharge causing problems at point of transition.

Applicants from the UK, US, New Zealand and Canada can join the Australian Defence Force and on completion of 90 days' service are eligible for citizenship. Non-citizen members of US armed forces may apply for naturalisation following a year of honourable service.

## Barriers to promotion

Gurkha and Fijian veterans reported barriers to promotion and restricted access to non-infantry roles. Despite passing examinations and regularly outperforming British soldiers in exercises, enlisted ranks were promoted at much slower rates. Access to a commission was almost exclusively through the late entry scheme, having progressed to the rank of sergeant or warrant officer. In February 2018, Lieutenant Colonel Tol Khamcha Magar became only the fourth Nepali to progress beyond the rank of major. In April 2025, the three officers graduating from Sandhurst who joined the Royal Gurkha Rifles were white British.

*The Kathmandu Post*, 5 February 2018.

<https://www.gurkhabde.com/news/new-officers-join-the-royal-gurkha-rifles-april-2025/>



### **Impact on mental health and wellbeing**

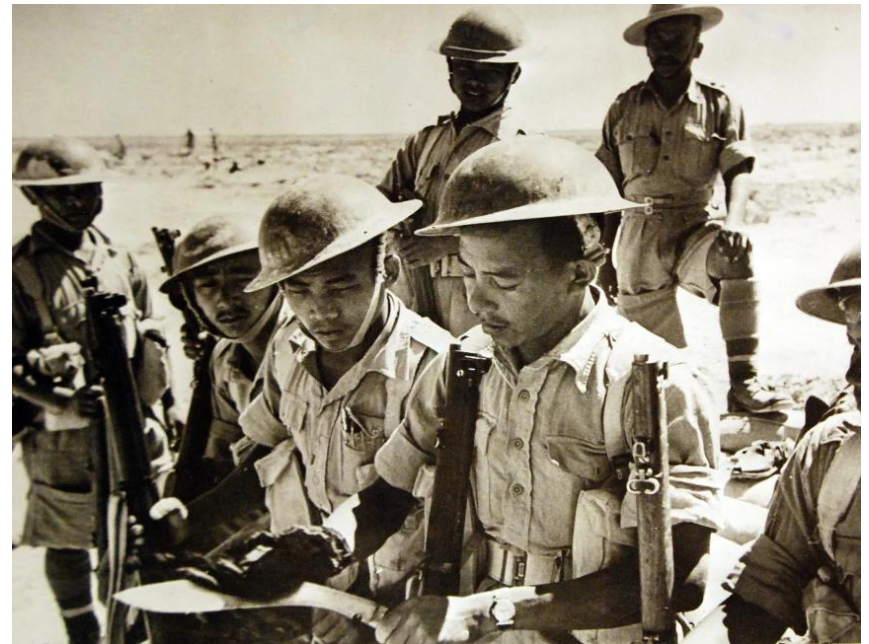
Overt narratives about mental health were limited in scope. However, many participants expressed distress and sadness. Gurkhas interviewed in the study reported having learned of PTSD only recently. A culture of resilience may have inhibited Gurkha and Fijian veterans' narratives about depression or post-traumatic illness.

Kohrt, B.A. & Hruschka, D.J. (2010), Nepali concepts of psychological trauma: the role of idioms of distress, ethnopsychology and ethnophysiology in alleviating suffering and preventing stigma. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*. 34: 322-52; Jacob, K. (2019), Idioms of distress, mental symptoms, syndromes, disorders and transdiagnostic approaches. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*. 46: 7-8.

## **Bodily symptoms as an expression of stress and trauma**

Traditionally, British psychiatrists argued that Indian and Gurkha troops expressed stress in bodily (somatic) form rather than as psychological illness. In summer 1942, British commanders interpreted Indian and Gurkha somatic cases in the North African campaign as a function of poor morale rather than combat stress.

Edgar Jones, Laura Palmer and Kam Bhui (2024), Mental health, ethnicity and the UK armed forces: historical lessons for research and policy, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 93(103957).



## Symptom study

A quantitative study of four samples drawn from the King's Centre from Military Health cohort database collected between 2004 and 2023:

Gurkha (n = 254), Fijian (n = 112), UK ethnic minority (n = 178), and White British sample (n = 254)

Physical and mental health symptoms were measured using individual items from the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-15), Posttraumatic Stress Checklist (PCL-C) and General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). Ethnic samples were matched by military role, and veteran or active service status. The study was designed to identify different patterns of physical and mental health.

L.M. Palmer, K. Bhui, T. Chalder, N.T. Fear and E. Jones (2025), The impact of ethnicity on the physical and mental health of UK armed forces: a retrospective cohort study, *BMJ Open* (submitted).

### **Symptom study**

A quantitative study found that White British participants reported the worst physical and mental health overall. Gurkha participants reported the lowest levels of physical and psychological symptoms. The Gurkha service personnel reported better mental health than the other three groups except for two symptoms: repeated disturbing memories/ thoughts/ images of a stressful experience, and feeling upset when reminded of stressful experience.

Both British born samples reported more bodily (somatic) complaints and greater problems sleeping, feeling irritable, anxious and concentrating than the Gurkha sample.

## Symptom study

Given a history of discriminatory practices, why then did Gurkhas report better physical and mental health than matched white British service personnel?

1. The Gurkhas are a highly selected population; annually around 200 riflemen are accepted from 20,000 applicants shortlisted for a series of tests of strength and endurance.
2. They serve in Gurkha units supported by a caste system and family histories of military service.
3. They had fewer adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than the White British sample.

L.M. Palmer, K. Bhui, T. Chalder, N.T. Fear and E. Jones (2025), The impact of ethnicity on the physical and mental health of UK armed forces: a retrospective cohort study, *BMJ Open* (submitted).



#### 4. A culture of resilience and military achievement

Lt Colonel John Cross, a World War Two veteran who served in British Gurkha regiments from 1944 to 1972, reported that hardships were endured with “no grumbling, no illness”. It is possible that a culture and expectation of resilience may have inhibited the report of psychological symptoms, not least in an environment where Gurkhas sought to prove themselves as being better than British infantry.

Mulibir Rai (2018), *The Way of the Gurkha: an investigation into the Gurkha's position in the British Army*, PhD thesis, University of Kingston, 47, 53, 168.



## **Physical symptoms**

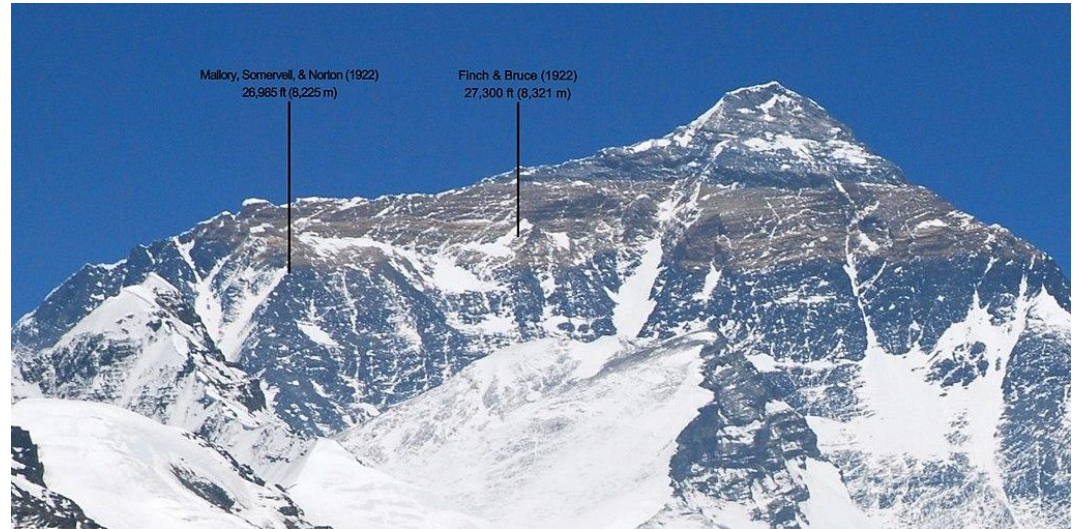
Overall, the Fijian and white British service personnel reported the highest levels of bodily pain. Back pain and joint issues were common to all four groups, though lower for the Gurkha sample. The Gurkha sample had the least physical symptoms with higher energy levels and much better sleep. No evidence was found for the traditional British medical belief that stress was expressed in bodily pain by Indian and Gurkha troops to a greater degree than British soldiers.

Laura Palmer, K. Bhui, T. Chalder, N.T. Fear and E. Jones (2025), The impact of ethnicity on the physical and mental health of UK armed forces: a retrospective cohort study, *BMJ Open* (submitted).

## The 1922 Everest expedition

On 27 May 1922, Captain Geoffrey Bruce MC of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles and Captain George Finch climbed to 27,300 ft, then a world record height. They were awarded the Olympic Medal for Alpinism by the 1924 Paris Committee. The Expedition was led by Brigadier-General Charles Bruce who had commanded the 1<sup>st</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas at Gallipoli.

C.G. Bruce (1923), *The Assault on Mount Everest 1922*, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 62, 243-44; Royal Geographical Society (1924), *Everest 24*, London: Riverside Press, 63, 82.



## Tejbir Bura

With Bruce and Finch, carrying a far greater load of oxygen cylinders and without windproof clothing, was Lance Naik Tejbir Bura also of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles. Tejbir Bura had no previous experience of mountaineering but had been chosen by Bruce and Finch for his strength, determination and high morale. The Olympic Committee later awarded medals to Tejbir Bura and the 7 Sherpas who were killed on Everest, possibly because of a campaign by Brigadier-General Charles Bruce. Tejbir Bura also took part in the 1924 Expedition, being responsible for establishing the route between Camps 1 and 2 on Everest.

C.G. Bruce (1923), *The Assault on Mount Everest 1922*, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 62, 243-44; Royal Geographical Society (1924), *Everest 24*, London: Riverside Press, 63, 82. E.F. Norton (1925), *The Fight for Everest 1924*, London: Edward Arnold, 57.



## Summary

Our studies have shown that Gurkha veterans, despite experiencing hardships and discrimination are resilient, and have successfully managed the transition to civilian life. Gurkha soldiers in the UK armed forces have better physical and mental health than matched British samples.

From 2007 Commonwealth and Gurkha service personnel have been employed under the same terms and conditions as UK-born soldiers and receive the same pensions. Access to UK citizenship has been eased for Gurkha and Commonwealth soldiers but remains costly. Formal barriers to promotion have been lifted but have yet to result in widespread change. The legacy of Empire is deeply rooted and continues to impact, albeit at a reduced level, on the wellbeing of Gurkha and Commonwealth veterans.

Tim Robinson (2019), *Fair treatment for Commonwealth personnel in the armed forces*, House of Commons Debate Pack, CDP 2019-0107.