



# THE INVISIBLE FORCE

SINGAPORE **GURKHAS**

**CHONG ZI LIANG**

WITH ZAKARIA ZAINAL



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*SUNDAY BEST: A retired Gurkha takes the chance of the annual general meeting of the Singapore Gurkhas Pensioners' Association to wear his police tie and clip. The Gurkhas, who usually prefer to keep a low profile, do not shy away from expressing their pride in serving the Singapore Police Force when among peers.*



# 「 SILENT SENTINELS 」

*Plucked from the foothills of the Himalayas, the Gurkhas dedicate more than two decades of their best years to the security of Singapore. But upon retirement, the soldiers from Nepal find their pleas to the very government they served falling on deaf ears.*

*ON GUARD: Gurkha policemen keep an eye out for security threats during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit at the Suntec International Convention & Exhibition Centre in November 2009. The meeting drew top leaders from all over the world, including US President Barack Obama. The highly trained contingent is deployed at such events that require the highest level of protection.*



Shortly after Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, there came, along with other pressing national issues, the task of protecting the new prime minister. Lee Kuan Yew was temporarily moved out of his home at Oxley Road while security was beefed up. Among the measures were a honeycomb brick wall put up to screen the front porch from the road and bulletproof glass for the windows. When Lee finally returned home, he found Gurkha policemen posted as sentries. At that time, the Gurkhas were mainly used to quell riots and protests that were rampant during the '50s and '60s. Now, the safety of the prime minister was their responsibility as well.

The Gurkhas still guard 38 Oxley Road today. Forty-nine years after our nation's independence, these soldiers from Nepal continue to protect Singapore's most important people and places. Despite the island state's development of its own armed forces and police, their signature broad-rimmed khaki hats are a familiar sight at the homes of top ministers and at government buildings like the Bureau of Currency and the Whitley Road Detention Centre.

Though trusted by the highest levels of government in Singapore, precious little is known about the Gurkhas except their reputation of unwavering loyalty and bravery. Yet the contingent has a history that is even longer than our nation's independence – the Gurkha Contingent (GC) marked its 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary quietly in 2014. The Gurkhas' service to the British crown goes back even further. Their being here in the first place is part of Singapore's colonial past. Even today, former British military

officers, employed by the Singapore government, continue to command the GC.

More than just glamorised security guards, the GC forms an indispensable unit in the Singapore Police Force. From the moment they are recruited, the Gurkhas develop jungle warfare skills that other police outfits do not possess. A Gurkha fresh from Nepal spends nine months in recruit training, including a substantial stint on Pulau Tekong performing firefight drills, applying camouflage, digging trenches and learning everything an infantry soldier should know.

Selections of top performers are also routinely sent to attend the jungle warfare operator's course in Belize and Jamaica. Chief Inspector Dawa Sherpa, who retired from the force in 2006, remembers that the jungle canopy in Belize was so thick he thought the sun was setting, only to realise it was barely noon when he checked his wristwatch. Because of the extensive infantry training, "We know the A-Z of jungle warfare," Sherpa says.

To develop proficiency in paramilitary tactics while juggling a schedule of policing and guard duties, the Gurkhas adhere to fitness requirements beyond normal police units. For the youngest Gurkhas, an annual fitness test consists of running 16 km under two hours while carrying 16 kg of weight. A 45-year-old Gurkha on the brink of retirement still has to complete the 2.4 km run, a standard fitness test for all Singapore Armed Forces and police members, in under 10 minutes and 30 seconds. Local soldiers under the age of 25 need only clock 12 minutes and 20 seconds to clear the same test.



These high benchmarks put the GC on par with the special forces in Singapore. The Gurkhas are comfortable with weapons that normal police officers do not carry, such as shotguns, rifles and submachine guns. The best of these already crack troopers are selected for the Special Action Group, the Gurkhas' own SWAT<sup>1</sup> unit, while the top marksmen form a sniper platoon. They are the only sharpshooters deployed to secure key events and protect VIPs;

1. *Special Weapons and Tactics*

the snipers of the police's elite Special Tactics and Rescue (STAR) team are used only during the unit's emergency operations such as hostage situations.

## COLONIAL LEGACY

Ever since Nepalese soldiers drove back invading British forces from India in 1815, the British army, unused to military setbacks in the heyday of the empire, quickly decided the Nepalese

*WALK OF SHAME: A rejected Gurkha hopeful leaves the British camp in Pokhara, Nepal where Gurkha selection is held annually. Anxious parents wait outside the gate, hoping not to catch a glimpse of their sons as that would mean failure to enter life in the military.*

# THE INVISIBLE FORCE: OVER THE YEARS

1950

## Maria Hertogh Riots

Gurkhas were deployed when Malay and European communities rioted because of a court ruling to give custody of young Maria Hertogh to her biological Dutch Catholic parents after being raised as a Muslim for eight years.

1949

## Gurkha Contingent Formed

After the demise of the Sikh Contingent following World War II, the GC was established and housed in Duxton Plain. They guarded key installations such as the Istana and prisons and also functioned as a riot squad.

1956

## Gurkhas relocate

The GC left their former barracks and shifted to Mount Vernon Camp, home to the Gurkhas until today. Besides living quarters, the camp had a large canteen, a drill shed, a children's school and a Hindu temple.

1955

## Hock Lee Bus Riots

Gurkhas were dispatched to neutralise rioting Hock Lee Bus workers, affiliated with the Singapore Bus Workers' Union, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. Pro-communist elements within the union exploited the dispute to force a confrontation with the government.

1956

## Chinese Middle School Riots

Gurkhas were called upon to disperse protestors when rioting broke out after an ultimatum was issued for students to leave school premises. This conflict arose when the government dissolved the Singapore Chinese Middle School Students' Union. Students staged a sit-in and camped at several schools.

1963-1966

## Konfrontasi

A brigade of Gurkhas was committed to this conflict that was Indonesian President Sukarno's guerilla warfare response to the proposed merger of the Federation of Malaya with Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak.

1964

## Race Riots

Gurkhas, including military reinforcement, were deployed to maintain the peace when major rioting broke out between Malays and Chinese during a procession where 20,000 Muslims had gathered at the Padang to celebrate Prophet Muhammad's Birthday.

2001

## After 9/11

Taking on a higher profile, the Gurkhas complemented police patrols and safeguarded key installations in light of tighter security. They were also deployed to guard buildings like the American Club and Singapore American School.

2000

## UN Mission

The GC were also involved in Singapore's overseas security and humanitarian missions. In East Timor, the Gurkhas trained new recruits from the police academy.

1970-1900

## Evolving Force

In a period of peace and stability, the roles of the Gurkhas have evolved from simply riot control and sentry guards. They are involved in training local officers as well.

2003

## Iraq Dispatch

Joining a 30-man team from the Singapore Police Force to Iraq, the Gurkhas trained about 1,500 Iraqi instructors and police officers for three months.

2004

## Pulau Tekong Robbers

Gurkhas apprehended two of the trio of armed fugitives that fled Johor and arrived at Pulau Tekong on a motorised boat. A total of 700 police and army personnel were mobilised in a massive search party.

2008

## Mas Selamat Escapes

The GC was deployed in a massive manhunt for detained Jemaah Islamiyah leader Mas Selamat Kastari, who escaped the Whitley Road Detention Centre. Two Gurkha guards were the last to see him after escorting him to the toilet where he escaped.

2013

## Little India Riot

The Gurkhas were deployed together with police officers to quell the unrest when hundreds of South Asian workers went on a rampage that left one person dead and 39 persons injured. An ambulance and two patrol cars were also set on fire.



# 「 THE BAD OLD DAYS 」

*Unlike today's peaceful and secure Singapore, the early Gurkhas faced a vastly different world, cutting their teeth as policemen battling militant unions, communists and even protesting students.*

*ONE FOR THE ALBUM: Staff Sergeant Chandra Gurung with a memento from the day he received an award presented to him a few years before his retirement.*



As a Gurkha who arrived on our nation's shores before its independence, Chandra Gurung witnessed the 1964 racial riots that Singaporean children now read about in their history textbooks.

"When Malays were beating Chinese, Malay policemen would let them continue," says Gurung, who served from 1961 to 1988. "When Chinese were beating Malays, Chinese policemen would do nothing." Racial tensions were so highly strung that each three-man patrol needed a Gurkha to act as a neutral presence while his counterparts, one Chinese and one Malay, dealt with their own community. At the height of the violence, Gurung often did not even have time for a meal.

Unlike the Gurkhas of today who mostly stand as a deterrent force in peaceful Singapore, the first batches of Gurkhas cut their teeth as policemen quelling riots and strikes that were widespread in the bad old days. These retired officers form an important group of eyewitnesses to a tumultuous period of our history.

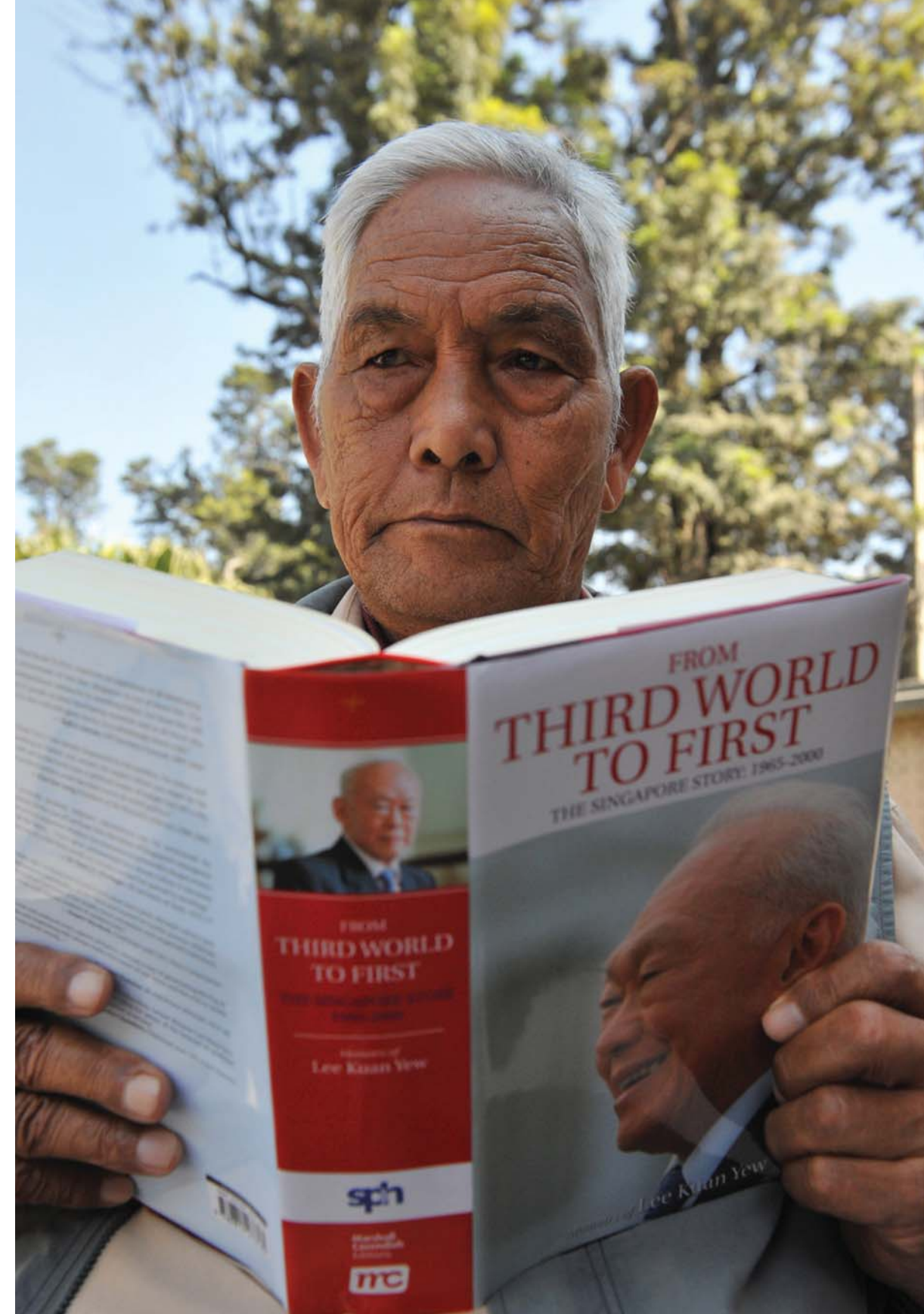
The '50s and '60s were times when blood was spilt over religion and race in Singapore. The 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, following a court order for a Dutch girl raised as a Muslim to be returned to her Catholic parents, showed how sensitive an issue religion was and still is. Similarly, friction between races erupted in mayhem in 1964 and 1969.

It is the 1964 racial riots, which started during a Malay procession marking Prophet Muhammad's birthday, that Tulsi Gurung remembers most vividly. "Everyone was shocked

by how quickly the violence spread," he says. "Very soon, we had to stop fights occurring at so many different places." The Gurkhas, together with local police, worked 16-hour shifts, patrolling the vicinity of Geylang Serai, where most of the unrest was happening. A curfew was declared and lifted only 11 days later. But a second riot occurred just a month later and the Gurkhas were once again deployed as an impartial buffer between Chinese and Malays baying for each others' blood. The clashes killed 36 people and left more than 500 injured. As tough as Gurkhas come, Gurung admits he was exhausted by the constant fighting but nevertheless had the call of duty to answer.

These events were to repeat themselves in 1969 as Singapore – still fresh from its acrimonious separation from Malaysia – could not escape the racial violence that had spilt over from up north. Also known as the May 13 Incident, it was the worst episode of communal conflict in Malaysia's history and when news of the clashes inevitably reached Singapore, Chinese triads began plotting revenge against Malays here. Rumours then swirled of Malay reinforcements arriving on our shores. The Chinese gangs finally struck against Malay villages in Jalan Ubi and Jalan Kayu, triggering Malay reprisals the next day.

Staff Sergeant Prem Bahadur Limbu, who served from 1964 to 1991, says parangs and spears were used in the clashes. In a week, four were killed and 80 were wounded. Widespread cordons and curfews were enforced to end the conflict. Gurkhas were put on the watch round the clock to make sure the tinderbox of ethnic tension did not reignite.



*FAMILIAR STORIES: Tulsi Gurung has read the first of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs and is now on to the second book. The Sergeant, who served from 1951 to 1972, helped keep the peace during the tumultuous history of violent strikes and protests described in the first prime minister's book.*



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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Chong Zi Liang** is a sub-editor with The Straits Times whose features, columns and photo essays appear in Singapore's national broadsheet.

In 2009, he worked for the Nepali Times in Nepal, where he first got to know the retired Singapore Gurkhas. The experience inspired him to base his Final Year Project in university on the Gurkha Contingent of Singapore.

He graduated from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information in Nanyang Technological University in 2010 with an Honours degree in Communication Studies.



**Zakaria Zainal** makes meaning of the world through his photographs. Enticed by the visceral changes of a former monarchy's transition to a federal republic in Nepal, he first picked up his camera. His first monograph, "Our Gurkhas: Singapore Through Their Eyes" is an anthology of portraits and anecdotes of the retired Singapore Gurkhas as they reminisce about life in the Lion City, from the 1950s till today.

While he continues making pictures, Zakaria has been moving away from traditional documentary work to photographing closer to home – or even closer to his heart. More of his work at [www.zakariazainal.com](http://www.zakariazainal.com)