The Gurkhas need no introduction, with their storied reputation built up over two centuries of battlefield exploits around the world.

A unit of these Nepalese warriors have been serving Singapore for more than 65 years, yet precious little is known about them. Indeed, the Gurkha Contingent clashed with communists and militant unions in its early days and continues to protect the island state’s most important places and people even today.

Discover the untold story of the Singapore Gurkha through the eyes of different generations who carried the famed kukri blade: the rigorous, punishing training that forges elite soldiers; the family lives of these paramilitary policemen; and the lengths their sons go to follow in their fathers’ footsteps.

Above all, The Invisible Force reveals the loyalty and gratitude the Gurkha has for Singapore, and the struggles he and his family face upon retirement, including an unresolved request for better employment terms.
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.

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.

LIFE IN THE LION CITY
The Gurkhas spend the first 30 years of their adulthood defending Singapore, inevitably growing attached to the island where they experience the major milestones of life.

HAPPY RETIREMENT? NOT JUST YET.
Unable to remain in Singapore after retirement and worried about the future of their families, discharged Gurkhas are putting retirement on hold, seeking second employment in deadly battlegrounds. Meanwhile, one man fights for his right to live in Singapore.

DREAMS OF BEING A GURKHA
For the sons of the Singapore Gurkhas, following in their fathers’ footsteps is an attractive way to escape unemployment and alienation in Nepal, a supposed homeland that is strange to them. In 2012, at least 15 of them made it to the final hurdle in their quest to join the British Army.

THE LAST WORD
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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.

SILENT SENTINELS

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Shortly after Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, 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, 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 longer than our nation’s independence – the Gurkha Contingent (GC) marked its 65th 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.

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 unit, while the top marksmen form a sniper platoon. They are the only sharpshooters deployed to secure key events and protect VIPs.

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
**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**Chinese Middle School Riots**

Gurkhas were called upon to dispense protesters 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.

**Gurkha Contingent 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.

**1949**

**1950**

**1955**

**1956**

**1963-1966**

**1964**

**1970-1900**

**1996**

**1998**

**2000**

**2001**

**2003**

**2004**

**2005**

**2008**

**2013**
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.
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 other’s 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 split 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.
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About the Authors

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