

National Archives photos



This vintage image shows Gurkhas armed with P'1842 muskets and Kukri knives.



These Gurkha troopers were armed with Snider-converted P'1853 Enfields.

श्री स्वर्ण लोकार्णव

Treasures of Nepal

The mysteries of a 200-year-old Asian arsenal have just been unlocked, and tons of rare artifacts have been brought back to the United States for all to see—and own.

by **Garry James**,
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Gurkha Havildar (sergeant) Bishnu Thapa poses with a traditional Kukri knife and a "Long-Lever" Martini-Henry rifle (r). The Royal Arsenal in Kathmandu was so jammed with arms that much of it had to be removed from upper story windows, as the bottom floor was impassable (middle). Inside the arsenal were stacks and stacks of arms, such as the Pattern 1853 Enfields (far r.). All were universally dirty, having been covered with almost 200 years of brick dust.



Photos from Nepal courtesy of IMA

All of us dream of finding buried chests of Spanish doubloons or an undiscovered Rembrandt or a cased Paterson revolver in grandma's attic. But, in the grim reality of today's world, it seems as though such romantic notions are just that—*notions*. Imagine then, coming across not just one or two rare arms—but thousands of them! Improbable? Perhaps. But it did happen—in fact it's still happening. And it's one heck of a story.

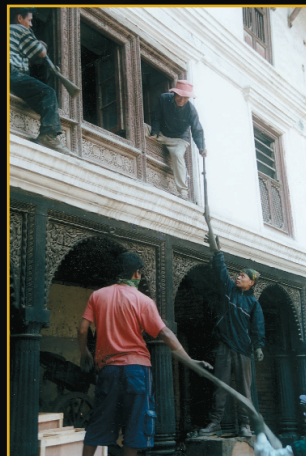
Origin of the Treasure

As all great treasure hunt stories should, this one begins in the past and involves proud families, intrigue, death, warfare, and fortunes won and lost. The scenario and cast of characters is so bizarre and unusual that no modern novelist would have the nerve to make them up. But it is true nonetheless.

The tale begins some 200 years ago in the exotic Kingdom of

Nepal, located at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. In 1814 the Nepalese Army, composed of the legendarily fierce Gurkha fighters, invaded northern India—then under the control of the British East India Company—and occupied the hill stations of Mussoorie, Simla and Dehra Dun.

Needless to say the English were perturbed, not only for the effrontery of the thing, but for the real possibility that they might lose an area



boasting some of the most agreeable weather for summer retreats on the sub-continent. They launched a counter-attack, and though initially defeated, after several tries the Company troops, under General David Ochterlony, finally subdued the Gurkhas, broke through the Katmandu valley and threatened the nation's capital. Realizing the game was up, the King of Nepal, at the advice of Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa (more about him later) decided to sign the Treaty of Sagauli, which

allowed the British to establish a Resident at Katmandu and permitted them to cross Nepal and trade with Tibet. As well, the Company was allowed to recruit Gurkha soldiers into its armies. As a further part of the agreement, the British vowed to supply the Nepalese armies with small arms, artillery and ammunition—a promise, as we shall see later on, that was more than generously fulfilled.

During hostilities, both the British and Gurkhas gained considerable respect for one-another regarding

their tough fighting abilities and chivalric behavior. For example, in one of the earlier campaigns the British built a monument to the Gurkhas which was inscribed, "They fought in their conflict like men and, in the intervals of actual conflict, showed us a liberal courtesy." Gurkhas, carrying their deadly trademark kukri knives, have remained an important element of the British Army ever since, and they have served proudly in scores of campaigns and both World Wars. They remain among the most respected and highly decorated fighting forces in the world.

But, back to Nepal. After many years of honorable government service, Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa (remember him), decided to retire to his country estate. Things weren't to rest there however, for palace intrigues resulted in his being lured back to Katmandu in 1839 where he was imprisoned on charges of high treason. Bhimsen, a proud man, refused to be broken under torture. Finally he was told that his senior wife and children would be dragged naked through the streets of the city. Unable to deal with the shame, the former prime minister hanged himself in his cell. Upon hearing of his death, Bhimsen's wife, who was residing at the family's ancestral palace, Lagan Silekhana, hung herself from one of the residence's high windows. Even today, a rope is suspended from the window in tribute to the statesman and his wife.

In 1845, Bhimsen Thapa's nephew became prime minister and set about righting the wrongs that had been done to his uncle, deftly removing all enemies in a subsequent purge. Lagan Silekhana was never reoccupied, and instead turned into a royal arsenal to house British gifts as well as home-fabricated arms and equipment.



The .577-450 Martini-Henry Bira gun (above), designed and built in Nepal, operates similarly to the American Gardner gun. The artillery (r.) represented everything from siege guns to howitzers and mortars. The brass and iron mortars (middle) were from various countries and periods. Napoleonic period brass cannons (far r.) had been converted to breechloaders.





Pattern 1839 Conversion Musket

1853 Enfield With Snider Conversion

Martini-Henry "Short Lever"

Pattern 1842 Musket

Pattern 1842 Musket (With Sword Bayonet)

There were thousands of bayonets, including some rare Sapper & Miner sword bayonets for P'42 muskets.

The Treasure Hunt

The story now jumps forward a century or so to 1969 when Christian Cranmer, now president of Int'l Military Antiques, was walking along Oxford Street in London with an old boarding school chum one day. His friend, whose parents were in the high-end antiques business, had just returned from Nepal with a fantastic story about meeting a Russian ex-ballet dancer who owned a hotel in Kathmandu.

According to the Russian, there was an incredible cache of arms in an old palace in the heart of the city. Interested, Cranmer's friend visited the arsenal and, if anything, found his

guide's claims to be considerably understated. It was an Aladdin's cave full of wonderful things.

After hearing the tale, Cranmer immediately set about verifying the story, and discovered that it was true. He began negotiations with the authorities, but as always there was a glitch. Several different governmental agencies felt that the material came under their jurisdiction, and it became almost impossible to determine exactly who to deal with.

Finally, in 2000, because of a serious lack of up-to-date weaponry to fight Maoist rebels—and an even greater lack of funds to pay for it—the Nepalese decided to start accepting offers. After rather tortuous negotia-

tions, Cranmer and his partner, Sudhir Windlass, owner of Atlanta Cutlery, emerged victorious.

Originally the bid was for 200 tons of armament, but after it was learned that there were 146 cannons destined for smelting, and an almost equal number of artillery carriages that were systematically being burned, it was decided that these too should be included in the package, bringing to 430 tons the total of everything from bayonets and knives to siege guns. Congratulating themselves on their successful bid, Cranmer and Windlass didn't realize their troubles were far from over.

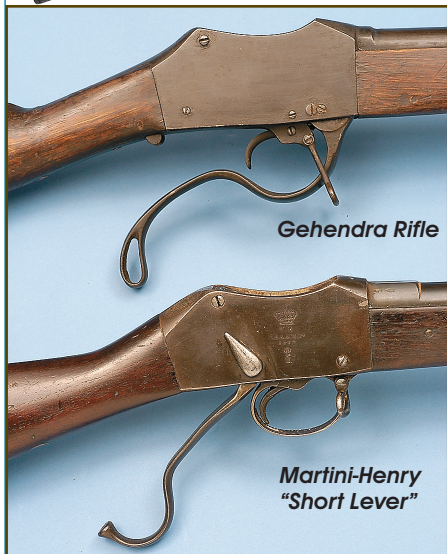
Arriving in Katmandu in January, 2003 for a one-month stay to supervise the packing and shipping of their prize, Cranmer made a tour of the palace and realized that the job would be considerably more complicated than he had originally thought.

At one time, with its gilded wall decoration and exotic murals, Langan Silekhana must have been one of the most splendid residences in Nepal, but after 200 years of neglect it was, as described by





Mk IV Martini-Henry "Long Lever"



Gehendra Rifle

Martini-Henry "Short Lever"

Cranmer, "absolutely filthy." The rooms of the palace, which had no electric lights or running water, were stuffed from floor to ceiling with stacks of muskets, swords, rifles and artillery. To make matters worse, working space was at a minimum and everything was covered in layers of black brick dust (seven tons of which still falls on Katmandu daily). Realizing the job was going to be several times greater than originally imagined, Cranmer dug in and started removing the treasure. Much of the material actually had to be passed out through high windows, as there was no way it could be negotiated out of first floor doors. Every day brought new revelations. Of course, they knew about the Pattern 1842 muskets and Snider and Martini-Henry rifles, but who could account for the piles of Model 1853 Slant-Breech Sharps carbines and rifles, or the million or so

musket flints and .75-caliber Brown Bess musket balls? Or what about the bronze cannon emblazoned with the cipher of Catherine the Great.

His one-month stay stretching to half a year, by June Cranmer had all 430 tons packed into 31 containers and ready to be moved south, through India from Kathmandu to Calcutta. Unfortunately the convoy was hit by a monsoon, and a trip that should have taken three days took three grueling weeks.

Despite adversity, all the loot is now in the United States in two locations, at Int'l Military Antiques in New Jersey and Atlanta Cutlery in Georgia, where it has been unpacked, is being cleaned and currently offered for sale. I recently took a tour of IMA's facilities, and, frankly, it was virtually impossible to keep a journalistic detachment concerning what I saw. The only word for it—and really it's quite inadequate—is "Wow!"

For example, for years I have treasured my very-good condition Mark II Martini-Henry rifle. Let's face it, until recently these things—in any kind of shape—were difficult to come by. Imagine now, if you will, walking into a huge storeroom where Martinis of various models and in different stages of preservation (most of them quite good, I might add) are stacked to the ceiling, wall-to-wall. This scene is repeated time and time again with such things as Pattern 1853 Enfield, Sniders, Pattern 1842 muskets, boxes of bayonets, stacks of swords, piles of kukris, bags of flints, pyramids of cannon barrels—it just goes on and on. Unfortunately space limitations don't allow me to talk about everything I saw

there, but I'll try to touch on the high points and describe some of the more interesting and abundant items. Bear in mind, now, that I'm a real British Colonial buff so I might have a tendency to get a bit hyperbolic—but I'll try and remain as balanced as possible.

The Arms

Pattern 1853 Enfields, Sniders:

Probably the most interesting arms to the American collector, especially Civil War buffs, would be the P'53 Enfields. This was one of the most widely used rifle-muskets during the War between the States, and it was Britain's mainstay longarm for decades. Later, many would be converted to breechloaders via the Snider system invented by New Yorker Jacob Snider. All of the P'53s and Sniders I saw at IMA were of the early pattern with barrel band springs. Most of the locks were unmarked, and all indications point to the fact that they were manufactured in India. Quality was quite good, and the condition of samples I pulled from the stacks was just fine. They are very nice guns, generally, in .577 caliber. Bayonets are available.

Pattern 1839, 1842 Muskets:

Prior to the introduction of the P'51 and P'53 Enfields, the Pattern 1842 (and earlier Pattern 1839 flintlock conversions) were the workhorses of the British Army. The Nepalese P'42s and P'39s at IMA were in very presentable condition. All were of the East India Company style, featuring spurred trigger guards. Lock markings usually had EIC insignia, but some had private contractors' names, as well. The P'39 shown

One big surprise was the stacks of 1853 Slant Breech Sharps rifles and carbines (r.) with no markings and no record of their origination. However, one expert has stated that "an American connection cannot be ruled out." Stacked alongside brass-trimmed muzzleloaders and bags of musket flints were piles of World War II vintage arms, such as these British-made Sten guns (second image from left).



here, for instance, was put up by Manton of Calcutta—one of the preeminent makers on the sub-continent.

Bayonets are available, and all the guns I viewed had the India pattern bayonet catch. As well as standard muskets, there are a few of the scarcer Sapper & Miners Carbines, again, EIC marked, but with the Hanoverian spring catch. The guns are in .73 caliber. Bayonets are available for all of them—even the scarce S&M sword bayonet.

Martinis: I spotted three basic types of Martini-Henrys—“Short-Lever” Martini-Henrys of varying models, Mark IV “Long-Levers” and the Nepalese-manufactured Gehendra rifles, which were built on the Westley Richards pattern. Probably the most interesting of the batch from a design standpoint, the Gehendras had some functioning problems, so the British, at various times, sent over the other two models to supplement them. All Martini-Henrys I saw were ex-British military issue and were decorated with the proper “VR” and crown cipher, as well as the model number and date. Most had stock markings indicating they had been sent from Indian arsenals. Condition ranged from basket cases to some in excellent shape. Most were just fine, and if you’re a fan of the film “Zulu,” you could do much worse than having one these Mark IIs in your collection. They are in .577-450 caliber, and bayonets are available.



According to the Russian, there was an incredible cache of arms in an old palace in the heart of the city. ... It was an Aladdin’s cave full of wonderful things.

Sharps Rifles, Carbines: These were certainly the most interesting arms I looked at. Both the rifle and carbine are built on the 1853 Slant Breech pattern and include the Lawrence pellet primer. The ones examined had no markings whatsoever, and general quality, while not bad, was not up to the standard Sharps product. Carbines had brass fittings (to include a patch-box) and long sling bars. Barrels measure 22". Sights were of a couple of styles, one similar to earlier Sharps carbines and others looking much like those on P’53 Enfields. The rifles are quite long (40" barrels) and fittings, to include a spurred fore-end cap, are of brass. A large rear sling swivel takes the place of the standard lever pivot. Christian tells me that he had the stock wood analyzed and that it is Honduran mahogany—quite interesting. There are no records of these arms anywhere in Nepal or Britain. While the quality hints at indigenous manufacture, IMA’s researcher in England states that “an American connection cannot be ruled out.” While the guns are dinged and dirty from storage, condition is generally quite good, indicating that they saw little or no use. The guns appear to be around .54 caliber. No bayonets have been found.

Brown Bess Muskets,

Baker/Brunswick Rifles: All the Brown Bess muskets were pretty much in pieces, and looked unsalvageable. The good side of this is that there will be plenty of spare Brown Bess parts available, including some very nice

locks. Research seems to indicate that the guns themselves were made in India, but that the locks were manufactured in England and stamped with Nepalese markings. Despite earlier reports no Baker Rifles were brought back from Nepal, though there were a number of Brunswicks—both standard models and smoothbored Indian patterns. I only saw one example of the latter, and it was in good shape. Brown Bess, Baker and Brunswick bayonets are available.

Knives, Swords: Probably the greatest treasures in the blade category are the high-quality early (19th century) kukri knives. There are also some later ones. The blades are marked with Nepalese writing, and all seem to be in excellent condition. Heretofore it’s been difficult to get a real issue kukri at a reasonable price. No longer—these are a good deal and highly recommended. As well, I saw piles of British military swords of varying styles, as well as Indian tulwars—some with pretty fancy decoration. Those Brit swords with hilts decorated with royal ciphers seemed to lean heavily toward the George V period (post 1911) and had “GRI” (“George, Rex Imperator”—George, King Emperor) indicating Indian Army origin.

Artillery: Frankly, this was some of the most fascinating material in the trove. To begin with, IMA/Atlanta Cutlery brought back several Bira Guns. These are double-barreled,

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The author (r.) and IMA President Christian Cranmer (l.) inspect a pair of the mysterious Nepalese Sharps rifles. The Sharps rifles (above) featured 40" long barrels and were apparently intended to be fitted with socket bayonets. The Sharps carbines were all brass-mounted and fitted with 20" barrels and ladder-style rear sights. Both had Lawrence pellet primers and unique sling swivels (above l.) that replaced the normal hinge pins.



All Pattern 1842s (top) found in Nepal were of the East India Company with spurred triggerguards. Lock markings show the "EIC" insignia. Though not as abundant as the P'42s, the Pattern 1839 conversions (bottom) were represented in some numbers. This particular example has a lock built by Manton of Calcutta—one of the preeminent makers in India.

Nepalese-made-and-designed mechanical machine guns based on the Gardner principle. Chambered in .577-450 Martini-Henry, they are nothing if not imposing. From their huge boxy steel receivers through their gigantic drum magazines and massive field carriages, they are undoubtedly the strangest looking automatic arms ever built—and they're also really neat. There were tons (literally) of other artillery pieces from stubby little mortars to some pretty heavy-duty brass howitzers. I was particularly impressed with some Russian guns that looked similar to those in photos taken during the Crimean War. More than likely they were captured in the Crimea and eventually sent surplus to Nepal. Who knows, they could have been in the batteries that fired upon the Light Brigade! There were a large number of brass Napoleonic-period guns that had been converted to breechloaders, as well as a British nine-pounder muzzleloading field gun of Zulu War vintage that had been altered to breechloading and fitted

with a recoil mechanism. The earliest piece noted was a Russian brass cannon cast with the arms of Catherine the Great, though there were some mortars that looked as though they could predate that.

Other stuff. As noted earlier there are just too many different items to cover them adequately. Noted in passing and recommended are Martini-Henry combination tools and oil bottles, as well as Brown Bess flints and musket balls.

So there you have it, this century's first—and perhaps last—great firearm treasure hunt. The nice thing about it is, unlike much material brought up from the Caribbean or North Atlantic, the riches can be purchased by the average enthusiast. History on such a grand scale, has rarely been so affordable.

For more information, contact Int'l Military Antiques (Dept. AR), 1000 Valley Road, Gillette, NJ 07933; (908) 903-1200; www.ima.com; or Atlanta Cutlery, (Dept. AR), Box 839, Conyers GA 30012; (800) 883-0300; www.atlantacutlery.com.

