

Gurkhas invade Iraq!



In this second installment of the testimony of veteran Gurkhas, 89-year-old Bharati Gurung (left) recalls fighting on behalf of the British in Iraq. Some of the details of the battles bear a striking resemblance to the conditions faced by coalition forces there. The regiment moves on to

Cyprus and is captured by the Germans in Tobruk and taken to a POW camp in Italy.

His story is part of *Lahurey ko Katha* that records the lives of Gurkha soldiers, most of them over 75 years old. This fortnightly column is translated from Nepali by Dev Bahadur Thapa for *Nepali Times*.

Gurkha and Indian troops advance on Tobruk before they were captured by the Germans.



In the year 1939 fighting erupted between the forces of Britain and those of Hitler. In the beginning we boarded the ship in Bombay and were off-loaded at a place called Basra in Iraq. Enemy troops were concentrated there. An encounter with the enemy forces took place. They had put up their camp and taken defense when we started disembarking from the ship. Defence meant a situation where they are shielded from getting hurt, but we were not.

In attack we had to run in the open field. Defence means to save oneself and kill others. On one occasion we trudged for 16 hours. On the way there was no sign of water, nor green grass—not even stone or soil. Just sand. We lost three or four soldiers on the march. Once in a while we could see one or two coconut trees on the banks of the river. For the night we had to dig trenches, if we didn't we could be killed by a bomb from the air. In spite of feeling drowsy, we had to keep vigil all the time and slept turn by turn.

Enemy soldiers appeared at our company supposing this to

be theirs, and on other occasions we blundered into their bases. True, Hitler's troops did appear there but their numbers was far more exaggerated in propaganda. For example, the rumour was rampant that a full brigade of Hitler's troops were in Iraq, but in fact only 20-25 soldiers had been dropped from planes.

The large river Tigris runs through central Iraq, the shores of which is believed to have petrol deposits. The largest deposit of petrol is in Kuwait between Iran and Iraq. The English had seized these oil fields since you need petrol to fly planes in the sky or for tanks. The monopoly of the British on the oil had put Hitler in a predicament.

No sooner did the war in Iran end, another front opened in Iraq. After Iraq lies Turkey. A high hill

stands on the left side of Turkey. We had orders to make trenches and with it check the onward march of the Germans. We proceeded further and arrived at Cyprus, lying in the middle of a sea. As we reached there, a whole lot of German troops were dropped by parachutes. We were instructed to rush to the spot where German troops were landing and kill them while they dropped. If anyone touched the ground, then we were to kill him then and there. They too opened fire but they could hardly hit us, as they were busy trying to land and avoid falling on a tree or into the sea. We managed to kill quite a few Germans there.

They killed some of our men too. One can't keep track of how many soldiers died. Some say up to 100,000 people could have

died in a single day of the war. There is no empty space in the battlefield—every inch is filled with troops. The tanks lead the way. That is followed by very many kinds of weapons. Then comes the artillery on each side of which march the foot soldiers. Weapons range from pistols to atom bombs.

We were afraid and earnestly sought the help of God to prevent war. But once war starts, you can't be afraid. You stand on the verge of death, but fear vanishes. There is no time to be homesick. Our sole concern is focussed on whether or not we have been hit by artillery fire. Some become experts at dodging the artillery. Even when they hear the boom, they can judge the distance and direction and take cover. Only when we were free

did we reminisce about home.

In Tobruk (Libya) there is a big port very similar to Bombay. Right over there our full army was captured by the troops of Hitler. They took away enough rations to feed an army for five years. At that moment Hitler disarmed all the British soldiers and set them free to go anywhere they liked. They had no weapons, nothing to eat and no clothes to wear. They were put on a cold hill in Italy. The officers numbered 150 at the minimum. There were Gurkha, British, Negro, Canadian, British, Australian and other officers from all over the world. One of our ex-ministers, Nar Bahadur from Sabet was also held captive there.

A few days later American planes found out where they were held captive. They surrounded the place and sent in planes to drop bombs. This caused havoc inside the barricade and people started fleeing. The men from other nationalities started running down to the plains where they were trampled by Hitler's tanks. The Gurkhas on the other hand, fled to the slopes where the tanks could not go. Gurkha officers like Nar Bahadur managed to escape. All Indian, Negro and British officers perished in the onslaught. They were scared of the mountains, and didn't go there. Nobody counted how many were killed that day. Along with Nar Bahadur, I escaped death by climbing up the hill. In all there were six Gurkha regiments of which a few got lost, others were killed. We escaped death by making ditches in the slopes and staying there. It was severely cold and we had no proper clothing. We ate roots. A few days later, the British forces arrived and rescued us.

Bhutan flower book

The reflexive Himalayan travelogue, pensive and Buddhist-tinged, is a tried and tested formula. Classics, such as Peter Matthieson's *The Snow Leopard*, are already in their umpteenth reprint. So too are the heavier and more serious plant books, such as Polunin and Stainton's *Flowers of the Himalaya*, which document with scientific precision the incredible botanical diversity of the region. In *A Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan*, the author combines splendid colour plates of Bhutani plants with cultural

anecdotes of a spiritual dimension, and in so

doing, has created a winning hybrid.

Hellum is both a scholar and a painter, having taught silviculture at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and exhibited his art in at least three continents. His interest in Bhutan, we learn, dates back to his days in elementary school in Norway where his teacher regaled the class with stories of exotic places. This sense of exoticism and romantic Orientalism pervades the book, and at times comes to the fore.



The structure of the book is pleasantly simple. Hellum divides his plant paintings by the seasons he recorded them in: spring, summer, autumn and winter. His description of painting the common rhododendron is one of the most touching—a young girl leads him to a flower, sits beside him as he paints, and becomes increasingly fascinated by the painter and the painting. As one would

expect from such a fairytale meeting, the description concludes with Hellum giving her the painting and making another one for himself.

Such feelings of mystery and magic pervade the book, and Hellum spends much of his time in wondrous rapture at Bhutan, its plants and its people. The aim, as he makes clear in the introduction, is not to list each plant in the country. Rather, he "completed most of the drawings and paintings in this book in the field as exercises in meditation and concentration", a theme to which he often returns. Couched in conspicuously Buddhist terminology, the reader is reminded that "flowers are an ideal medium for such meditation, because what is more transient than the beauty of a flower?"

Hellum feels this so strongly that he even explains to a hitch-hiking Tibetan monk that "the paintings were only vehicles to concentration, and not ends in themselves". No wonder then, that the monk "nodded and sat silently for the rest of the trip". Hellum is not preaching to the converted, he is simply filled with respect for the ways of Bhutan, a country he wishes would "send ambassadors abroad to bring some sanity

and relaxation to the frenzy of Western living".

Language is an issue to which Hellum frequently returns, primarily because he is frustrated by his inability to communicate with people in Dzongkha, Hindi or Nepali. Given this manifest barrier, it is a little surprising that he finds it "very difficult to return to [his] own culture after having been immersed in Bhutan's". His description of the Nepali road workers he encounters as "aliens" is not the most sensitive of terms to have chosen given the present problems.

A Painter's Year is a beautifully produced personal voyage through the plants and seasons of Bhutan. By breaking with convention and merging different styles, the author has created an extremely original and engaging book which brings together the natural and the spiritual in a successful way. As Hellum himself concludes: "Every story in this book brought a different kind of silence." ●

A Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan
AK Hellum
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