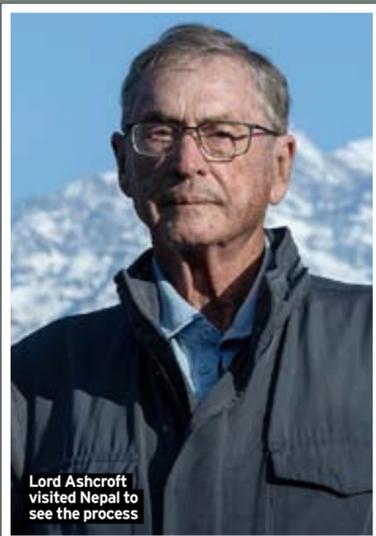


THE WICKER (BASKET) MEN



Lord Ashcroft visited Nepal to see the process

It's one of the toughest military recruitment tests on the planet. The prize? A place in the famed Nepalese unit which has been a stalwart part of the UK armed forces for two centuries. LORD ASHCROFT was invited to watch Gurkha selection 2026



Running the doko race carrying baskets



Hopefuls trying the medicine ball challenge



Sanjib, left, and Pranish, won their places



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IT IS 7am in the foothills of the Himalayas, dawn has broken and the early-morning mist is clearing from the valley when a sharp shout of "Ready, go!" starts one of the world's toughest endurance tests. Distant snow-capped mountains, up to 7,000 metres high, provide a dramatic backdrop to the brutal challenge.

Within seconds, a group of fit young men aged 18 to 21 begin to strain every sinew in their toned bodies to complete a steep uphill 3.4-mile course in the quickest time.

To make the challenge even harder, each would-be military recruit must carry on his back a wicker basket containing 33lb of sand. Shoulder straps and a head band are used to support the weight.

Each young man knows that if he takes longer than 43 minutes to complete the course, his dream will be over, at least for another year.

The quicker his time, the better his chances of selection for one of the most elite fighting forces on the planet: the Brigade of Gurkhas.

The doko race, as this event is known, is named after the Nepali wicker baskets used by contestants, and the run plays a key part in the annual recruitment process.

Despite an alarming shortfall in military recruitment, the Brigade of Gurkhas is the

EXCLUSIVE From Lord Ashcroft in Nepal

most oversubscribed unit of the entire British Army.

For its 2026 intake – who arrived in the UK earlier this month to begin their nine-month infantry training course at Catterick, North Yorkshire – there were more than 10,000 initial applications, only 323 of whom would be selected.

That is all the Brigade needed this year, meaning 97% of applicants would not achieve their goal, despite many passing all the selection phases.

Winning a place in the Gurkhas – whose motto is "Better to die than be a coward" – provides a wonderful career and a life-changing salary for the successful candidates.

For their first year's service, while they are being trained, the new recruits will earn more than £26,000 a year. This compares with a typical annual wage in the country of 900,000 Nepalese rupees, or just £4,500.

For more than 200 years, since the days of the East India Company, Gurkhas have played a

crucial role in the UK's armed forces. They are known for their courage in combat as well as their loyalty, professionalism and determination.

And thanks to the Gurkha Justice Campaign, championed by the actress Joanna Lumley and others nearly two decades ago, Gurkha veterans won the right to settle in the UK. Their high salaries and good pensions mean most recruits will send money back to their families in Nepal.

The Gurkhas are also known for their lethal close-quarter battle weapon, the curved kukri knife, which is up to 18 inches long, and their chilling battle cry, "Ayo Gorkhali" – "the Gurkhas are here".

As a champion of bravery and a collector of gallantry medals, my admiration for the Gurkhas stretches back many decades. So I was delighted to be invited to Nepal, the land-locked nation in south Asia, to witness the third and final phase of the Gurkhas' annual recruitment programme.

In darkness before 6am, batches of around 35 young men arrive daily throughout January to undergo a four-day assessment. Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries but all are immaculately turned out in new tracksuits and trainers.

This year, the best 571 recruits from recruitment phases one and two came to British Gurkhas Pokhara on the outskirts of the city in western Nepal. After undergoing

document checks, they were welcomed by Major James Hornby, the Officer Commanding at the camp. Potential recruits must have good health and educational skills as well as superb fitness levels.

On day one, the recruits were given a medical examination as well as a basic half-hour written English language exam.

These two tests alone eliminated 10% of phase three candidates.

DAY TWO consisted of an English spoken and listening test, and a one-mile run with a maximum time permitted of just over eight minutes. Day three for the young recruits started with the doko race. Then, after returning to the camp, each candidate undertook three strength tests: the medicine ball throw, the mid-thigh pull and the jerrycan carry.

Each challenge has a set pass standard. Once again, candidates failed if they did not meet any of the standards required.

The final day of the assessment involved a 20-minute interview in which three assessors tried to find out the true character of the potential recruit and his commitment levels. They asked about his motivation for joining the Gurkhas and also evaluated how robust he might be on the battlefield.

This interview ended their four-day assessment. The remaining recruits then had to wait days, or in some cases weeks, to learn if they had passed phase three with a high enough score to be amongst those selected this year.

Successful candidates sign on for 12 years in the British Army, although most serve nearly twice as long.

The drop-out rate amongst Gurkhas is extremely low, although eventually some transfer into other units in the British Army other than the seven Gurkha regiments. Nepalis are recruited for the Brigade of Gurkhas only.

Major Hornby, the OC of the camp, told me: "With the level of applications, we can afford to be selective."

"But we have to make the selection free, fair and transparent to ensure our offer remains credible and attractive."

The Gurkhas seek to advertise their recruitment far and wide and encourage applications from every caste and region. For the 2026 intake, there were applications from 74 of Nepal's 77 regions.

I stayed in Pokhara earlier this month to observe results day for all the remaining candidates taking part in phase three.

By this point, after all the elimination stages, only 414 prospective recruits were left. The final 323 required candidates were recruited on a points system from their four

days of challenges. After a nervous wait, each young man learned his fate in person from Major Hornby in a room with a giant Union flag draped on the table in front of the OC.

Those who had failed were directed to double doors to their left and given enough rupees for their bus fare home.

The candidates who had received welcome news were directed through a second set of double doors directly ahead of them. Soon afterwards, they were given some basic drills and allowed a call to their next of kin to pass on the good news.

They were also given a haircut and measured for their uniforms.

Unsurprisingly, given their level of commitment, recruits who had received welcome news could not hide their jubilation.

Some ran or skipped out of the room with broad grins, others puffed out their cheeks in sheer relief.

Pranish Gurung, 20, one of two brothers, had a broad smile on his face as he told me: "I was very happy to be selected because I had worked very hard. I can now provide my family with financial help."

"Last year I was a bit sad [after failing the selection process] but I motivated myself to come back and try again."

"My grandfather was a Gurkha in the British Army and he has been my inspiration. I always wanted to follow his path.

Today I can say that I have achieved my dream and made my whole family proud."

Sanjib Magar, 18, one of five children, was equally delighted to succeed in joining the Gurkhas at his first attempt. "This is the happiest moment of my life," he said. "I called my mum and she was very happy at receiving the call. I am very excited by the prospect of training in the UK."

THE UNSUCCESSFUL candidates were despondent and they trudged off slowly and wearily, some trying to hold back tears. However, these young men know that if this was their first year as an 18-year-old applicant, they still have two more years in which to re-apply and, hopefully, qualify in future recruitment processes. No young man can apply more than three times, or if he is aged over 21.

Richen Pakhrim, 19, had failed at his first attempt at joining the Gurkhas. "I was a bit sad but I will do my best in the coming year and try again," he told me. "I feel hugely privileged to have been invited to Nepal to observe the final selection phase for the Brigade of Gurkhas. Today there are more than

4,000 Gurkhas in the British Army out of a total full-time personnel of some 73,000. I left Nepal full of admiration for the qualities and discipline of the young recruits.

On February 6, they attended their formal Attestation Parade in Pokhara at which they swore their oath of allegiance to King Charles III, before heading to the UK.

It's little wonder the Brigade of Gurkhas remains one of the world's most respected fighting forces – one whose servicemen, both Nepali personnel and British officers, have been awarded 26 Victoria Crosses, the most prestigious gallantry award of Britain and the Commonwealth.

Before leaving Pokhara, I was given a tour of the local Gurkha Memorial Museum. As I departed for the airport, I recalled the wisdom of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw MC, a former Chief of Staff of the Indian Army.

His words had been pinned in large letters below his photograph as one of the museum exhibits, and they read: "If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or is a Gurkha."

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @ LordAshcroft

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