HIMALAYAN HOSPITAL SANDHURST IN NEPAL

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Nepal

NEPAL is a fascinating independent kingdom about 500 miles long and from 90 to 150 miles in width, lying on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. The Tibet region of the People's Republic of China is to the North, Sikkim to the East, and India on the South and West. The snow covered mountains, including Everest, Annapurna, Machapuchare, and Kanchenjunga of the upper border give way to a central belt of foothills and valleys, and a lower third of tropical jungle region adjoining the plains of India, the Terai. Most of the 'facilities' are concentrated in Katmandu, the capital. The architecture, communications, untouched scenic splendour, courtesy and honesty of the country are of a bygone age. Open only to outsiders for little over a decade, though hill tribesmen have served splendidly in the Gurkha Regiments of the British Army for over 150 years, Nepal is coming in to line with the 20th century at its own chosen pace. Indian and Chinese neighbours display some of their interest by starting roads; American, German and other concerns show their presence in various projects. In general the country remains as it was, undeveloped and unspoilt. Some air links to a variety of about a dozen grass landing strips, unusable at monsoon (June to September) and perhaps other times of the year, exist, but on the whole transport is on foot, distances being measured in days because of the nature of the country rather than in miles. Even the contours have contours, and rivers and ravines, with nerve-testing bridges or ropewalks of the sketchiest, may be approached by tracks liable to be washed away by the rains.

The difficult medical position has been well described by Gulati (1965) and has changed little since. Dharan with its British Military Hospital and cantonment lies in the eastern region. A proposition for a British/Nepalese medical team to open a Red Cross hospital in the western hill areas in 1968 had been put forward, and it was thought that a suitable place for this would be in the Baglung or Kusma areas. Accommodation would initially be tented.

Sandhurst and Singapore

Parties from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst are encouraged to go overseas on various sorties, and the Adventure Training Officer of Old College, Captain G. R. Owens, had Royal Engineer contacts in Far East Land Forces who could produce a surplus hospital-type Nissen hut with gable windows and to have a masonry base and ends. His network also enabled him to spend the Easter vacation on a reconnaissance to Nepal, and in consequence of this and a previous meeting with Dr. John Cunningham of the proposed medical team, it was decided to take a party from Sandhurst to erect the hut as a base for the new hospital. This would be at the operational site if Government clearance came through in time, or, if not, would be north of Pokhara where it would serve as an advance base, and also as a centre for training village medical orderlies, now to be stepped up with the forthcoming return of many members of the Brigade of Gurkhas.

Arrangements were made for the hut to be flown to Nepal on some fortuitous Royal Air Force flights, and for the purchase of such materials as were required, in India or locally. The stores were taken care of by various helpers in Katmandu (and thence transferred to Pokhara) and in Paklihawa on the border. The expedition members were to consist of 12 officer cadets from Sandhurst, including two invaluable Nepalese, one destined for the Brigade of Gurkhas and one for the Nepalese Army, Captain Owens, and Dr. John Adair, Lecturer in Military History and member of previous overseas expeditions. From 9 Independent Parachute Squadron, RE, a corporal as site foreman, and two sappers, a bricklayer and a joiner, were also included. Taking the three Engineers and four cadets as an advance party, a flight was made to Singapore in late July to assemble the medical kit.

The refreshing welcome at "MED" Branch more than compensated for the solitary half hour's rest available after delivering the party to Nee Soon, and the expedition was now truly launched.

Preparation.

The mounting had in fact in some respects been just that speedy. Medically, in the period after joining 'Himalayan Snail' following returning from a short spell in the Middle East straight from annual camp in June, much had to be done in the United Kingdom in consulting all authorities on the problems ahead. Locally experienced were contacted, and relevant literature and appreciations consulted. The prototype Capperault light-weight splints were borrowed and the inventor's general Nepalese knowledge freely imbibed. However, with time short and commitments many, doubt remained whether all was as completely tied-up as could have been liked by the day of departure. This was taken with an injunction to find Don in the 'Yak and Yeti' in Katmandu, as he operated a helicopter for an American dam-building company which might be persuaded to fly in our direction at times, and instructions about the best type of sandalwood for funeral pyres in case of necessity—all reminiscent of many years earlier when the back of an envelope with a dog-leg on it and the word 'Suez' scrawled in a corner had been the sole navigational aid proffered to take a three tonner and ambulance to the Mitla Pass.

The facilities of the Health Wing of the Far East Training Centre at Nee Soon were most co-operatively invoked to provide a comprehensive exhibition and briefing for the main party due soon to follow. A detailed list of subjects to be covered in this respect had been issued in the United Kingdom together with the routine instructions about dental checks and other items of preparation of a force for overseas, but previous experience necessitated taking no chances that any had slipped unprepared through the net. It has been written (Samuel, 1965) that the departure lounge of an airport is no place for medical briefing, but activities in the assembly shed of a transit camp prior to a flight for Akrotiri the previous month had shown that this procedure was still in some cases being followed. The stay in Singapore was supremely helpful, Medical Branch through the issuing agency of the British Military Hospital providing every possible aid, as did the Health Wing. Supplements to the general stores were also obtained through this medium, including a vast supply of porridge oats; though a slight misunderstanding about the reduction in weight to be achieved by transferring lemonade powder in to lighter polythene bags resulted in this being proudly presented so packaged, but still in the original tins. Some of the kit necessarily became available only just before flying on; an accompanying contents list indicated that an anonymous helper had included extra

insecticide in the form of an aerosol, leading to a very hasty re-check to locate this potentially lethal air freight. This however had been spotted and removed, though without deletion, by another packer, and the consequent littered scene around the transport for the airfield during the search for the aerosol was evidence of yet another precaution which, though unnecessary, could not be neglected. Singapore had provided other hazards; more seemingly terminal than a forced helicopter landing at Kluang on a rapid visit to Terendak on separate military matters had been a return to the garrison from Singapore town one night in the suicide seat of a taxi seemingly driven by an obsessively death-wishing maniacal Chinese racing driver, bent only on conversation with the passengers in the back seat.

Approach

Armed now with sufficient to cope with every foreseeable emergency in a remote hill area with no possibility of air evacuation or wireless communication, the entire party set out on a Gurkha leave flight to Calcutta and Barrackpore. As well as Millbank bags, insect repellents, Paludrine, salt, water sterilising powder, DET, mosquito coils and appropriate clothing, the kit included sufficient to cope not only with possible traumatic episodes and tropical conditions but various more homely possibilities, including rabies, diphtheria and other semi-forgotten disorders, leeches and lice, as well as obstetric and other emergencies among the local population. Of necessity the expedition had to be prepared for the possibility of being a 3 day trek from a known landing strip, and it had to be envisaged that for initial communication a runner would have to be sent in emergency.

From Barrackpore, described as an outbreak point of the Indian Mutiny, where the Sepoys burnt down the officers' mess and "showed other signs of disaffection", the advance party, with Captain Owens this time in place of two of the officer cadets, flew to Katmandu by Royal Nepal Airlines, while the remainder went by rail with the baggage across India to the Gurkha recruiting post at Paklihawa, just inside Nepal. After the vast flats of the Indian plains, the first sight and descent into the Katmandu valley from the air was as near an approach to a sight of Shangri-La as could be imagined. A sundrenched fertile valley, with houses like illustrations from Gulliver's Travels, nestling in the sheltered and cultivated area was a joyous vision, and a promise of real delight should the expedition return intact with time to linger in the intriguing bazaars and Buddhist temples and other attraction of the region, where the narrow cobbled streets of old Katmandu saw sacred cows confronting battered jeeps and Embassy cars in the shadows of the overhanging eaves of the classical and beautiful Nepalese architecture.

With Owens remaining in Katmandu to attend to administrative and political matters, the advance party flew on to Pokhara in a Dakota, still fitted with side seats and a parachute cable: a familiar atmosphere to the engineer and medical detachment, though the vast mound of bundles and baggage roped to the floor, belonging to various locals taking the quick way back to the hills, would have made a neat stick out of the door somewhat impracticable. At Pokhara a landing was possible that day and the end of the flight line had been reached. Our first contact, a Gurkha subaltern on leave trekking through the area, joined us for a meal at the local "hotel", doubtless one day to be a fine tourist spot, but consisting for our purpose of a bare hut for a dining room, with outside on the grass a massive pile of disarticulated Nissen parts, a Tibetan sitting drowsily on it, where he had been since it had been flown in just before the monsoon broke.

Surrounded by delighted children, bullock cart transport was arranged for the hut components, and the march to the site commenced. With delays due to abnormal monsoon conditions, this was now likely to be the secondary (advance base) position, clearance for the Baglung area not yet having been received.

The hills

Walking or trekking is the universal method of getting about in Nepal and the advance party set out in brilliant sunshine. The original planning envisaged a three-day trek over the hills with a long column of porters, but with the halt being at the fall-back

Hill travel with a line of porters.

site, this was shortened. Full use was made of the People's trees at intervals on the way, large shade-casting, square, leafy growths with a base of stone around them at the right height to lean against, and a further shelf of stones to support the bundles universally carried on the back (from a headband) without these having to be shed. The unencumbered squat crosslegged on the top, and the time of day is passed pleasantly watching the world go by. Primitive agricultural and corn milling tableaux vied with village temples to attract the eye. Butterflies abound and cattle wander unimpeded, perhaps quarrelling on the paths and blocking the way. Precipitous green-clad hills with every available part terraced for crops if feasible, surrounded the route, with the snow-clad mountains a magnificent back cloth. Umbrella-bearing travellers, shaded from the blazing heat, bow gracefully in passing, or shyly smile and giggle.

The Shining Mission hospital, so-called from the reflecting surfaces of the tin huts,

was on the way, and Dr. O'Hanlon and Dr. Scott Brown, once of the Brigade of Gurkhas, were quick to provide cooling sustenance and a ward round in exchange for news from the outside world. The bed cases lay on these or their litters, with relatives cooking and caring for their domestic needs, while the local nurses tried to ensure that the callers at the clinic took their own medicines and did not redistribute these later. Three typical typhoid facies lay adjacent, looking like brothers. Buffalo crush and gore wounds provided a colourful traumatic section, with a young boy having traction for his broken femur by a boulder suspended in a rope sling. Infestations, pellagra and all manner of vitamin and other deficiencies, nephritis and bowel obstructions due to a variety of causes were commonplace and were seen. Tuberculosis and bronchitis are widespread: lung cancer not thought frequent. Peripheral arterial conditions including Buerger's disease are encountered, but coronary pain is not common. Lepers were treated in a separate village camp. Views and theories were exchanged on dietary influences, physical exertion from youth, and the contrasting effects of the locally-produced cigarettes with the complete absence of the internal combustion engine outside Katmandu, as aetiological factors.

This patient presented with abdominal pain. On examination a small swelling was palpable in the L.I.F. On prior inspection a rash was seen on the abdomen. The cause of this was a previous practitioner with a hot poker endeavouring to relieve the patient. The practice appears widespread, similar cases having been seen in East Africa and South Arabia, in the latter case for ribs broken in falling down a well.

Goitre. A common condition.

The site

The provisional site having been reached, the encampment was set up and the sappers looked gloomily at the boulder-littered falling ground, which was the nearest thing to a level area available for building. The stores, man-carried from the last gorge which had defied the buffalo carts, were set out, and a slow recovery made from the effects of raksi, the local brew, introduced to us by the incumbent of the Pension Paying Post the night before. Owens caught up the next day with the second Nepalese officer cadet, and confirmed that this was to be the site. Medically this eased problems somewhat, as a wireless link from the Pension Post was now within reach, and a hand-carry to the air strip, were it usable, or to the Shining Mission if necessary, was more practicable with less delay, but the engineering tasks were, if anything, greater. The advance sections buckled to, while the rest of the party trickled in during the next week, escorting the porters with the remainder of the stores, including everything from door frames to drip fluids, both of which would also be improvised on the spot if indicated.

The task

The "flat" building land, scarce in the mountainous country of Nepal, had a fall of two/three feet over its length and was studded with boulders rising above the projected floor level. These had to be either dug out or smashed with sledge hammers and wedges. One boulder in particular, larger than the rest, withstood all efforts to break it: after a week a huge hole was dug alongside and the undefeated rock buried. Boulders, 105 tons in all, had to be smashed to provide hardcore and masonry, the latter then having to be dressed by hand.

A good supply of water, readily available, removed one potential problem. However, the only source of both sand and "all-in" aggregate (of which some 40 tons were needed) lay in the foaming bed of the river at the bottom of a precipitous 200 feet deep ravine half a mile away; these had to be carried in back packs to the work area. Pulse-rate studies gave some alarming early results, but the Sandhurst recordings soon approached those of the native porters, including some seemingly tireless women, whose enlistment was required because of the necessity for speed to beat the monsoon. The threat every day of at least some, to continuous torrential rain, meant that the priority was to get the roof on as soon as possible, so that oversite concreting and masonry could be carried out under cover. Accordingly, 24 reinforced concrete piers, as springing points for the metal ribs, were quickly required. Two wheelbarrows, brought from Paklihawa caused much local amazement but proved their worth many times over, in work as well as in transporting children from the hill villages.

Exotic difficulties arose: three examples suffice. All stonework below ground level was jointed with a cement mortar. In order to save valuable cement, mud was used above ground and only pointed with a proper mortar at the finish of the job. This is not always wise in a monsoon. As one of the three foot thick walls was nearing completion, there was a mighty roar and it fell down: all scrambled clear. Rain had turned the mud jointing into a slurry and it had lost any strength it may once have had. At the next attempt, the masons built in smaller steps and whenever they stopped, covered the walls with imported polythene sheeting brought up with the other materials—valuable later as raincoat material.

Four of the metal ribs laboriously man-handled into position had holes for the purlins drilled in the wrong places. Under normal conditions, drilling twelve holes $\frac{3}{8}$ inch diameter in a $\frac{3}{8}$ inch thick piece of metal might take half an hour. However, there was no drill bit that size—on the site or anywhere in that part of Nepal. The ribs were carried some distance to the nearest village smith who then spent just over a day forging a suitable drill bit from a piece of iron. Once made it was fitted in a primitive drill, consisting of a wooden block turned by leather thongs in a wooden bow. Two days later, at a speed of just over two hours a hole, the job was finished.

Whatever other buildings and shelters were like in that area of the world, the hospital hut was to be for medical use and as well as the hand-hewn masonry base, was going to have real glass instead of shutters for windows, keeping out dirt and letting in light. Unfortunately, the frames were 18 inches too short and the glass sent was half the required size. All nine windows had now to be altered. Only hardwood was available, and the carpenter had only a hand saw. Even so he almost kept pace with the glass cutting (to fit the smaller inner frames which he also constructed) as this had to be timed to the temperature changes, which affected the success index of the glazing detail. So must the longbow archers of old have felt, unpacking crossbow ammunition.

Daily routine

A first light start meant a clear view of the peaks of the Annapurna range and Machapuchare, a great help to reveille. The length of the two or three hours work in the cool, early morning after a cup of tea, depended on the prowess of the duty cook. Breakfast—porridge (milk powder), sometimes dried egg and vegetable, army biscuits and tea—was followed by more building, until 12.30, when tea or Oxo with more biscuits

was taken, with an oatmeal block or ration of Horlicks tablets an occasional treat. Gradually the ensuing siesta shortened and the meal increased, with dried egg or vegetable leftovers incorporated. The three-hour break of the first day became an hour and, finally, a few precious minutes, snatched for refreshment. Local bananas—delicious—were later found, and after a Gurkha woman patient insisted on presenting an unsolicited gift of four eggs, an occasional source of supply of these was found by the more desperate, though the idea was not to buy up the sparse food supplies of the hill village, even when reasonably priced. The day continued its varied course in the afternoon, not merely a long round of insect repellent and rice, but a hive of industry. Labouring apart, miscellaneous tasks for even the medical cover included creosoting purlins—disposable surgical gloves and the ubiquitous polythene sheets as surgical aprons also served well for protective clothing—bolting arch ribs, sweating out acute abdomens—one should really remember to discard the Stilson wrench before palpating—dispensing Paludrine and other indicated therapies, and recording meteorological and physiological data: but all more than made up for on some days by the grandeur of the glorious scenery: green hills with little villages—the nearest had a tiger or puma reported—part tree-covered,

Village scene.

part terraced: beautiful blue skies, and white clouds. Not always—the mist could descend even to hide the top of the rib skeleton and cladding of the hut, and the rain could make even the adjacent hillside disappear. The stone-workers and masons sat chipping away under the universal umbrellas (for scorching sun or pouring rain) tied to sticks propped in the ground. Putty may be unworkable for installing windows in the wet, or tools,

inadvertently not replaced in the tent, may become too hot to hold as, in the later stages, the roof painting party found the metal sheeting was to sit on.

At dusk, a wash-up and change from the P.T. shorts (and shirt for partial protection from the fierce sun) and boots DMS (or plimsolls for the reckless) of the day, to long sleeves and trousers, jungle boots and anorak. Variations of attire were sported, but though the dress of the locals was perhaps approximated, nothing matched the turban, long skirt, blouse, cummerbund and jewellery in the nostril or caste mark of the female helpers brought by the craftsmen. Night literally was night: the evening meal, the main one, of packet soup, a heaped mess tin of rice, dried or perhaps local vegetables, a mince of meat blocks or, on good days, curried water buffalo and more rarely goat, chicken, and even a special treat, twice, a form of carp (unfortunately giving rise to an impacted-fishbone-in-throat case), followed by dried fruit and a hot drink, was taken by the light of lamps. As these flickered low, the more dedicated drinkers sipped their raksi, while others retired, to start again at five o'clock next morning.

Recreation

Trekking is the universal pastime, and foraging and supply trips were used to allow of visits to villages, Tibetan settlements, and such natural features as were within short range of the time-pressed expedition. Air-bed races in the turbulent river rapids gave visions of on-the-spot trepanning, but none suffered permanently while the sport was tolerated. Soccer with the locals unfortunately resulted in a challenge arriving, suddenly remembered on the eve of one of the many national holidays for which it was scheduled. Too late to decline, eleven set off for the field of the military vocational board school back at the township. Rank enabled the medical member to opt for goalkeeper, and also to avoid the further exhaustion and injury risk of a practice kick-in at the start. An early mark and dummy with a high-dropping ball, as in Army cup days of earlier times, justified selection for Sandhurst and England, and delighted the hilarious crowd, well pleased by the antics of the presumed World Cup winners poorly equipped for the slippery, but still part bare and hard, stone-studded grass, against the more orthodoxly shod home side. Some desparate falling on the ball, not all intentional, and not only by the goalkeeper, raised the minor trauma statistics. What they made of the news of the international match in Peking one wonders: but then the sudden strange appearance and constitution of the whole project must have made for puzzled reading of the reports in various circles.

Mail arrived fitfully, by hand, according to the vagaries of the rear air link and the wanderings to the region of various travellers. Visitors were (relatively) many, walking several days in some cases to call. Most welcome and startling was the British Ambassador, some-time of 1 PARA, even had he not brought several bottles of Scotch and gin from himself and the Military Attache and Embassy Liaison Officer. His unexpected arrival should really have been greeted by something more fitting than the sight of a Gurkha's gluteal abscess being attended. His gift helped considerably the final "topping out" party with a number of retired British Gurkha soldiers from local villages. This was a great success, one retired Queen's Gurkha Officer in a speech of thanks declaring his gratitude for the unit "sent to Nepal by Queen Elizabeth to help them", a touching glimpse of the unique relationship with these fine people.

Meteorology

Blazing sunshine alternated with driving downpours, and finally a superb, night-long electrical storm of unsurpassable magnificence, made man-made phenomena pale into puny poverty. Gazing in wonderment at the skies splitting asunder, one could hardly credit the world surviving the violence and antics of the great forks of lightning and bolts of fire of supreme magnitude, crashing around the huge mountainous stage. Little wonder the gods were supposed to dwell on the top of the Machapurchase, its summit forbidden to any who might dare to attempt it. Once, two days passed without rain: another time, continuous downpour for forty hours non-stop. Shade temperatures approached 100°F. by afternoon, but there could be no work in the shade till the roof was on. Water for injection was spared for wet bulb readings: wind velocities were estimated by Airborne techniques and but rarely exceeded the five to ten knots range.

Casualties

Many and varied were the disorders seen amongst the local population, who have to make the lengthy journey to Katmandu should any investigation, even only of the order of a straight X-ray, be indicated. It is rarely economical to take time off to do so, or to carry in a basket on the back another member of the family in need of this.

Of the Sandhurst/United Kingdom personnel, 16 of the 18 made 44 initial attendances with conditions from dysentery to dental filling replacement requirements. Skin disorders and abrasions, even minor ones, were slow to heal, and all required attention. To the notorious hazards of a building site, high in the league of industrial accidents, were added the special ones of home-made rickety bamboo scaffolding, flying chippings buzzing round the painters' legs (and one glass foreign body in an eye), and the snakes of the region, one of which died swiftly under a kukri in the midst of the wall-building team.

Physical ability varied widely between the most energetic and those of seeming lassitude: the party, despite some selection, displayed a range of capability in the hills. Constant reminders were enjoined about preventative medicine: rapid air travel to remote regions and contemporary belief in the powers of sophisticated medicine and surgery may lead to contempt of tropical conditions and diseases by the inexperienced, willing for example to sleep on the ground in tick-infested scrub, to assume clear water to be sterile, and to ignore, as unnecessary and old-fashioned, other basic precautions, if not immediately struck down on breaking the first rule. Poor examples by those travellers probably already incubating disorders for the future have to be overcome. None of the officer cadets had served in the Far East before (save the Nepalese) but had some introduction to climatic—and other—conditions on the journey to Singapore and India. Dietary monotony proved irksome, despite warning on this point, to hearty trenchermen, but some of the possible stresses on a party which had to be prepared to travel through monsoon conditions and sit these out in minimal tent shelter in isolated areas, were never fully tested. Despite all, and a barely adequate intake, originally planned more for convenience than for scientific nutrition, only one man lost one day's work, and had one day of light duties—and one or two others could not work flat out on some occasions for the various reasons mentioned. This was out of a total of nearly 520 man days actually on the site. No sequelae have been notified. Only one hospital admission in the time shortly following was known, the medical officer to have the

toxic debris round a surfacing missile fragment from a previous sortie removed from his maxilla. It would appear that esoteric conditions must be sought before isolated expeditions, as well as possible appendicectomies and dental clearance.

The aim had been achieved without unduly untoward mishap. Uncertainties there had been. The arrival one day of a partially near-English news sheet gave news of London. Diplomatic relations with China were not all they should be. The 18 gazed round the encampment, girded their loins, and looked to the border, prepared to hold off 700,000,000 demonstrators if necessary.

Annapurna. The hospital and personnel with an ex. Queen's Gurkha Officer and two aides.

The return

Following the topping-out rice and raksi, Scotch and singing, party inside the hut itself, tidying up and finishing touches began. An advance party under John Adair set off one day: the main body the next: and the Engineers, working to the end, on the third. The weather held: the monsoon season was ending. The walk back was now nostalgic: fitter and hardened, the pauses for greetings were to acknowledge genuinely old friends and not to steal a rest and breath. On down to the trading stores in Pokhara and so to the airstrip where each party in turn learned their predecessors had got away safely the day before. A skilled and co-operative pilot and the final thrill of seeing the hospital hut standing out proudly in the hills—a medical centre whence our surplus supplies and dressings had already been distributed to the scattered villages of the west as a forerunner of its purpose.

Katmandu

The promised pause to see the sights of one of the last authentic-to-its-own-traditional-individuality capitals of an independent country was possible. For the first time the party was split for other than operational reasons, all but the senior officer being accommodated together, he being translated from the elemental encampment of the hills to the marble and rug-floored luxury of a garden flat in a former Commander-in-Chief's palace residence. After the initial delights of lying long in cool baths, and drinking really potable tea, the old buildings and streets were explored. A reception at the Embassy followed: an impressive guest list, including the Nepalese Commander-in-Chief and other dignitaries, made all realise how much their efforts were appreciated. It was with a feeling of leaving true compatriots that the flight down to Calcutta was taken, with a final farewell from the Ambassador. Back to Barrackpore, where sitting around and sleeping were as popular as visiting Calcutta, and so to Singapore to debrief and return to the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Despite restricted overseas stations and service much can be achieved by suitable "Hearts and Minds" operations, particularly where Service specialists can be utilised.

Medical preparations, discipline and cover on such expeditions must be all the more embracing. Inexperienced personnel are more likely to be involved, and may not be under man-preserving battle-facing commanders requiring healthy men as much as clean equipment.

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