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## Lieutenant Colonel James Owne Merion Roberts

Field Marshall Sir John Edward

Jim Edward

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## Lieutenant Colonel James Owen Merion Roberts

Jimmy Roberts died in Pokhara on November 1, 1997, at the age of 81. He was not only a very able and distinguished soldier and great friend of so many officers and soldiers in the Brigade of Gurkhas but was widely known and admired outside military circles too. His life-long love of mountaineering, Gurkhas, photography, ornithology and conservation of wildlife all focused on Nepal and it was there that he spent the second half of his life. He never married, and his wish to be cremated in Pokhara, in sight of the spectacular Machhapuchhare, and for his ashes to be scattered on the waters of the Seti Khola summed up his devotion to his adopted country and its people.

Jimmy was born on 21st September 1916, the only son of Henry and Helen Roberts. His father was Headmaster of a school in Gujarat, and Jimmy spent his early years in India. Later he went to the King's School Canterbury and the Royal Military College Sandhurst.

After being gazetted 2nd Lieutenant, Unattached List Indian Army on the 27th August 1936, Jimmy joined the 1st Battalion, The East Yorkshire Regiment in India. A year later, in November 1937, he was appointed to the 1st Gurkha Rifles. He served with the 1st Battalion on the North West Frontier before the war and was Adjutant to the Regimental Centre in Dharmasala from 1940 to 1941. When the 153 Gurkha Parachute Battalion was being raised in October 1941 Jimmy was among the first to join, and he remained with it in India and Burma until after the war. He carried out the first operational mission of the 153 Battalion, being parachuted into north Burma with a few men to seek information about the Japanese in the Myitkynia and Fort Hertz areas. This earned him the Military Cross which he was awarded in September 1942. In March 1944 he commanded the A Company at the Battle of Sangshak where he led a counter attack to push the Japanese off the perimeter. For several unfortunate reasons there was very little official recognition of any gallantry in that desperate and influential battle and Jimmy was among the many who got nothing; not that he would ever complain. It was said that at this time he kept all his climbing gear for use in better times in a tin trunk labeled "A Company Sports Kit." For his services in Burma Jimmy was mentioned in despatches in June 1946.

In December 1947 he transferred to the 2nd Gurkhas, joining the Regimental Centre at Dehra Dun as Second-in-Command. After the move to Malaya he was posted to the 1st Battalion, joining in Singapore in June 1948. He spent the next seven years until October 1955 mostly at Second-in-Command but with a short spell as a company commander, and officiating as Commanding Officer on numerous occasions, the longest being from December 1951 to the 1st of May 1952. He proved to be extremely talented and efficient at all these jobs; he was clever, expressed himself clearly and honestly, often bluntly, and he was a forceful leader. He was mentioned in despatches in May 1953 and made MBE in May 1955 in recognition of his services during the Malayan Emergency, but it was because of the regiment's loss that he was never made Commandant of one of the battalions.

In October 1955 Jimmy was appointed Deputy Recruiting Officer at Lehra and on 10th October 1958 he became Military Attaché, Kathmandu, and Temporary Lieutenant Colonel. There were two highlights of his tour of duty there. The first of these was the King of Nepal's visit to the United Kingdom in October 1960. Jimmy accompanied the Royal party and was awarded the Order of Gorkha Dakshin Bahu (3rd Class) for his services. The second was Her Majesty The Queen's visit to Nepal in February 1961 when he was made MVO (4th Class, later converted to LVO) for his work in helping with the arrangements, and accompanying the Queen on her visit to Pokhara. He took over as Military Attaché to Charles Wylie in October 1961 and retired in May 1962 with an Honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

By then Jimmy had decided to live and work in Nepal, and using his unique knowledge of the Himalayas combined with his skills as a leader and administrator and his long experience with Nepali people, he invented "trekking" as a tourist attraction. He started up the company, "Mountain Travel Nepal," which remains the major successful operator in a field which has grown to some 350 trekking agencies which together make a big contribution to Nepal's economy.

Jim Edwards (Hon. Member GBA), owner of the Tiger Mountain Group in Nepal which owns the Tiger Tops operations as well as Mountain Travel, knew Jimmy since 1962 and worked and served with him since 1974. Jim Edwards states that apart from Jimmy's organisational ability, his care and love of the Sherpas, his moral fibre, unyielding honesty and volcanic temper, when aroused, Jimmy Roberts had a great sense of humour. Even in the most dramatic situations, Jimmy could see the funny side and very often leaving others around him at a loss as to why he was laughing or smiling.

For many years Jimmy's greatest love was climbing. As a young man he climbed in the Lake District, the Alps, Norway and Austria. In 1938 he joined the Masherbrum Expedition and recalled the horrors of helping to bandage blackened stumps of fingers lost to frostbite. The war put a stop to serious climbing, although during one short leave, Jimmy managed a spell in Sikkim. After the war he devoted almost all his leaves to mountaineering, on one occasion the Karakoram, and once spending two months with Charles Wylie climbing many peaks in the Alps. In 1950 he climbed with Tilman in the Annapurna massif. He was on the Himalayan Committee's shortlist to lead the 1953 Everest Expedition and although not chosen, he willingly organised the collection and carriage - by 70 porters - of the delayed supply of the oxygen cylinders and associated equipment from Kathmandu to the base camp. When they arrived John Hunt invited him to join the expedition but Jimmy declined and went off instead to explore the high country south of Everest. In doing so, he made the first ascent of Mera, "rather over 21,000 feet and not difficult," he said.

In November 1954 he made another first ascent, this time of Putha Hiunchuli, 23,750 feet, and in 1957 he led the expedition which got off to 150 feet below the summit of Machhapuchhare (22,960 feet). Charles Wylie said that was a more difficult climb than Everest. On the mountain Roger Chorley (now Lord Chorley) was struck down with what was later diagnosed as polio, and Jimmy personally escorted him, carried in a basket on a man's back from the mountain to hospital in Pokhara and then returned to the expedition. It was typical of Jimmy's care and consideration for others. By 1960 Jimmy had become a great Himalayan mountaineer and knowledge of the hills was unsurpassed and legendary. That year he led the British, India, Nepalese Services Expedition which climbed Annapurna II. In 1967 the Royal Geographical Society awarded him an Honorary Fellowship in recognition of his services to Himalayan exploration, and for some years he was local secretary of the Himalayan Club.

Jimmy was cremated with Buddhist rites on 2nd November and then on the 5th November the cortege moved from the Mountain Travel office to the Seti River just north of the British Gurkhas Recruiting Post in Pokhara. Among those attending this farewell were several dozen Sherpa families, Sherpa guides and of course his loyal staff headed by Bobby Gurung his adopted son, many who had been with Jimmy for more than 30 years.

Lt. Col. Willie Bickett read the obituary followed by speeches from the British Defense Attaché Col. Sandy Blackett, the British Ambassador, Jim Edwards, and several of his oldest friends. Then Jimmy's ashes and Buddhist offerings were confined to the Seti River, by Bobby Gurung. Two buglers sounded the Last Post followed by two minutes silence and Reveille which brought the moving Memorial Service to a close.

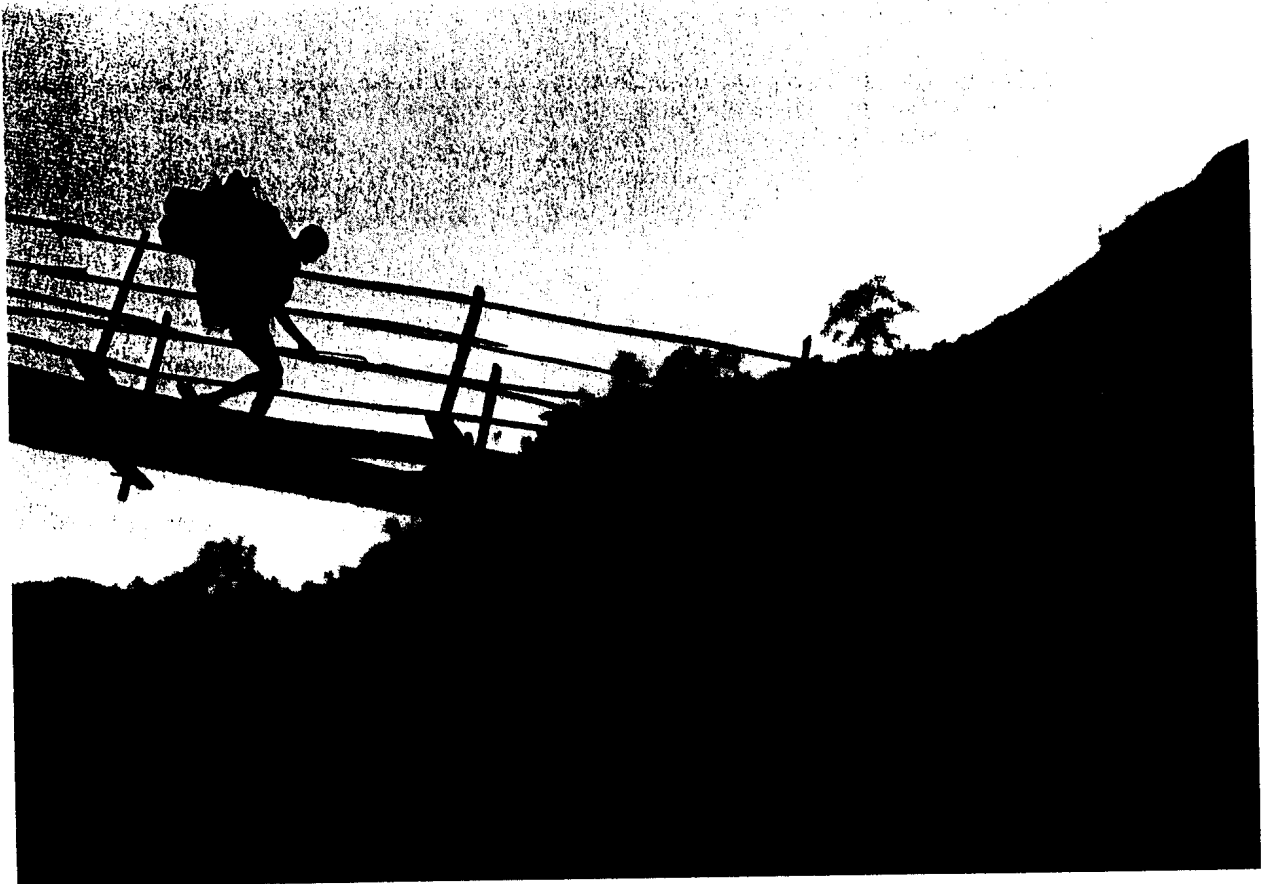
For the last few years of his life Jimmy suffered from painful arthritis, hip operations and several other afflictions but he gave them little attention and hated medical treatment. He suffered in silence and became

something of a recluse, living a spartan life. But he continued his association with "Mountain Travel Nepal," and to run his pheasant and wildfowl farm near the lake in Pokhara where he never failed to give his friends and visitors a warm welcome. And there he died, a man of charm and ability, kindly and generous, honest and outspoken, shy, modest, brave and tough. We mourn his passing but in Virgil's words - *meminisse juvabit* - we shall delight in remembering.

Field Marshall Sir John and Jim Edward

## Graham Clarke

Graham Clarke died from a brain hemorrhage on Tuesday, February 3, 1998 in Oxford, England. His funeral was held on Monday, February 9 at St. John's Chapel in Oxford. Those wishing to send letters of condolence should send them to Ms. Clarke at 40 Grove Road, Blandon, Woodstock, Oxford, England.



photograph by Kevin Bubriski