

# Ayo Gurkhali

Military adventurous training with the Gurkhas

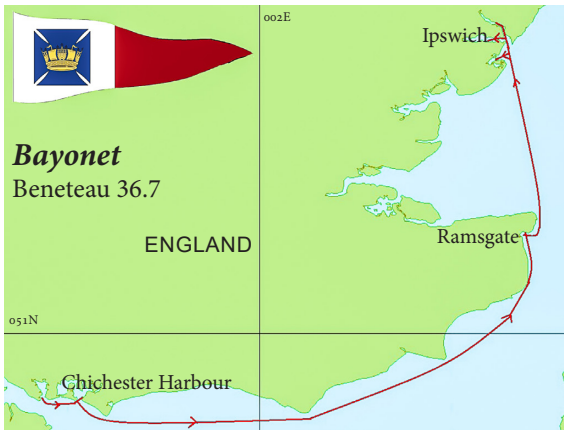
Rupert Anderson

The Infantry Sailing Association's Beneteau 36.7 *Bayonet* did not see much action in 2020, so to compensate they organised an offshore sailing expedition circumnavigating the UK mainland anticlockwise in summer 2021. Different units from across the Infantry took responsibility for each of the ten legs of the voyage. The Royal Gurkha Rifles (RGR) were allocated leg nine from Gosport to Ipswich, as their UK home base is near Folkestone.



Jamie Dick (left) and Rupert Anderson (author)

When asked to skipper the RGR leg of this military adventurous training expedition it was an easy choice, an opportunity to reconnect with fellow officers and soldiers from my parent regiment. Two other British Gurkha officers volunteered to join the crew, Colonel James Birch (late RGR) and Captain Jamie Dick RGR. We were keen to give the remaining berths to our Gurkha soldiers to provide them with a new experience. There were plenty of volunteers but, as you would expect from Gurkha soldiers, all Nepalese citizens from the land locked Himalayan



country, none had been on a boat before. Their initial concerns and questions were around the dreaded subject of *mal de mer*.

Military adventurous training is intended to be rewarding, and therefore enjoyable, but it is not a holiday for the service personnel taking part. Adventurous training generates the opportunity for service personnel to be

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(re)introduced to their mental and physical limits whilst also providing the chance to build a team beyond the norms of traditional military training. My aspiration for the five days was to safely introduce the Gurkha soldiers to the joys of sailing, allowing the unique experience of being offshore, whilst taking them out of their land-based comfort zone.

I arrived in Haslar Marina ahead of the main body, taking over *Bayonet*, from the previous crew, asking all the questions a skipper does when he is about to command an unfamiliar vessel. I appreciated the carefully crafted notes in the 'militarised' owner's manual and was grateful for meticulous diagrams detailing exactly what could be found deep in each locker. I realised how much more I could do for my own yacht's (*Wild Thyme*) inventory. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we alone will always skipper our own yacht, to think that we alone need to know where everything is and our crew can simply ask us if they need to find something – lemon, gin and tonic come to mind, but not on this trip. Our lockers would soon to be stocked with Gurkha curry, basmati rice, black dhal and fresh chillies.

The passage planning proved rewarding, helped by wanting to maximise this adventurous training expedition by a blend of minimal time in marinas and sailing at night. A balance was struck between some immediate safety and sail training whilst making the most of a decent SW4-6 breeze. With such a favourable weather



The Infantry Sailing Association's Beneteau 36.7 *Bayonet*

forecast it was tempting to get on with our passage eastwards, but rather than go straight into an overnight sail towards Dover we opted to depart late on the first day and make a sprint from Gosport to Chichester Harbour, arriving around sunset at an anchorage close to the Snowhill starboard hand buoy. This 13nm dash provided us all with a fair shake out, a reminder never to push a novice crew too

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hard too soon. Confidence in the boat grew and the tidal height calculations over the Chichester Bar brought back memories of my RYA exams at the Joint Services Adventurous Sail Training Centre in 2007. We settled into our peaceful anchorage. Sheltered from the SW breeze and lined our stomachs with Gurkha curry.



Gurkha riflemen, Ashik, Goodjohn, Devendra and Jeevan with Rupert and Jamie enjoying a Gurkha curry at anchor in Chichester Harbour

Our second day started in a noticeable calm. There was not enough breeze to sail. The fog rolling towards us from the direction of the South Downs was being pinned back and would eventually succumb to the August sun. We motored out of Chichester Harbour and laid a course of 145° with the aim of leaving the Looe and Outer Owers well to port, fully utilising the eastbound tide. We were soon heading for the Rampion offshore windfarm, which we passed on the inside just as the tide was turning against us. A really decent following W4 breeze soon saw us under full main and genoa, delighted to be turning the engine off and making good progress. These favourable conditions stayed with us for the remainder of the day and by the start of the night watches we were aiming for Dungeness. We observed many gannets diving for fish but our attempt to catch supper, led by Colonel James, proved unfruitful; pasta with Bolognese sauce would have to sustain us as we sailed on overnight. The wind completely died by the time we reached Dungeness. By daybreak on day three we were under motor and dodging traffic out of Dover. In the dark we had sailed past Sir John Moore Barracks, the UK base for The Royal Gurkha Rifles and home for the young Gurkhas onboard. Had we done this part of the passage by day they would have enjoyed conducting reconnaissance of their barracks from the English Channel. Instead, we quickly found ourselves on the inside track through the Goodwin Sands with Jamie skippering and all the

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Gurkhas, with their ubiquitous grins, taking turns on the helm

Gurkhas taking a turn on the helm, appreciating the fresh air. As the morning progressed, we started punching against a significant tide so a decision to take lunch in Ramsgate proved the right call (some members of the crew were also keen for a bit of time on *terra firma*). This pit stop enabled Jamie to navigate into a new port but also resulted in us departing after lunch with a perfect tide to sweep us north across the mouth of the Thames Estuary.

Exiting Ramsgate was possibly the most adventurous part of the expedition as gusting SE6 winds collided with a powerful ebb tide, throwing up a very lumpy sea. We knew we just needed to make the exit and we would soon be able to bear away and enjoy some tremendous downwind sailing. Was it too soon to force these novice sailors beyond their comfort zone? There was no shortage of volunteers to go forward to battle the waves engulfing the foredeck. The crew living up to the Gurkha's motto 'Better to die than live a coward'. Watching the crew bouncing around on the foredeck whilst hanking on the genoa (the self-furling headsail had been unserviceable from the start) made me smile ... this Gurkha crew was certainly out of their comfort zone, the adrenaline was pumping but that familiar Gurkha smile was ubiquitous. The London Array windfarm was kept to port and under full sail with a F4 wind abeam we raced through Kentish Knock on the long way round to Felixstowe.

Night fell just as we were seeing the bright lights of the port, at the Trinity South Cardinal, we turned onto 285°. Surprisingly for August and this part of the world, there was very little traffic of any sort as we approached, darting across to NE Gunfleet and then north over the Cork Hole. Jamie continued to skipper, gaining valuable East coast pilotage experience. As we rounded the Cork Sand port hand buoy he started to execute a plan which had us hugging the recommended track for



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yachts close to the South Channel. About now I realised not only was I not having to do much but the team was content; to think our crew of Gurkhas had never been on a boat until three days prior. It was a very rewarding feeling. They had *Bayonet* powering through the waves, close hauled under full sail at night, working seamlessly together on a rapid approach to the Port of Felixstowe. The WSW wind was eventually lost in the lee of Harwich so we dropped the genoa and motored the short distance between Shotley and our overnight anchorage to the west of Erwarton Ness in the River Stour. Anchor down at 0100.

Our mission had been to reach Ipswich where we would hand over the boat to the next crew. We had pushed hard, relatively speaking, to cover nearly all the miles so our penultimate day onboard *Bayonet* was initially spent retracing our track from the night before. Having only gybed twice since leaving Chichester Harbour we spent plenty of time on our tacking practice, always a good team sport, as we dodged other yachts for the first time in the Port of Felixstowe and out to the area of Sunken Pye. The S3 wind proved too tempting and we soon bore away and enjoyed a fantastic downwind sail up the River Orwell. We locked into Ipswich Yacht Haven in good time to begin the important clean up operation and enjoy a team meal ashore. They truly lived up to the Gurkha war cry of ‘Ayo Gurkhali’ – the Gurkhas have arrived.

The 200 nautical miles from Gosport to Ipswich is a well sailed route for many, but not for members of The Royal Gurkha Rifles. From start to finish every motion, sight and drill was a new experience for the Gurkha soldiers. I know I am biased



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Gurkha riflemen take a break from tacking in the Port of Felixstowe

but offshore sailing must be the best form of adventurous training. Time spent at sea is seldom wasted. There was not much time to reminisce for the four riflemen (above) and Captain Jamie Dick, one of the volunteer officers aboard. As part of 16 Air Assault Brigade, the First Battalion The Royal Gurkha Rifles were being deployed to Kosovo on a Strategic Reserve Force task, during which they found themselves committed to the NATO extraction of entitled personnel (specifically Afghans) out of Kabul.