



Gurkha Welfare Trust appeal to rebuild school in memory of fallen heroes

AN INTERNATIONAL charity is appealing for funds to help rebuild a school in one of the poorest parts of the world in honour of two brave and dedicated soldiers who lost their lives serving in Afghanistan.

The Gurkha Welfare Trust (GWT) is raising funds to rebuild a Nepalese school as a tribute to Lt Edward Drummond-Baxter and LCpl Siddhanta Kunwar who were known as Ed and Siddhanta.

Ed and Siddhanta started their lives in quite different settings, but were brought together through the bond found in serving alongside each other as members of the Brigade of Gurkhas.

Lance Corporal Siddhanta Kunwar was born on 19 June 1984 in Pokhara, Nepal, where he was raised amongst his brother and four sisters. He grew up against the dramatic backdrop of the famous Annapurna mountain range in the city where the British Gurkhas Pokhara recruitment centre lies. After completing his higher education from Kalika Multiple Campus he began to dream of becoming a soldier in the British army.

He passed the arduous selection for the Brigade of Gurkhas on 17 December 2004 and after his year-long infantry training joined 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles in October 2005.

Lieutenant Edward Drummond-Baxter was born in Peterborough, on 15 September 1983.

For much of his early life he lived in and around Peterborough with his parents and sister. Ed studied at Eton and subsequently at University College London. Whilst in London, Edward joined his local Army Reserves regiment, The Honourable Artillery Company.

Following his studies, Ed worked overseas for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in Japan. He then attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 2010 and commissioned into 1st Battalion, The Royal Gurkha Rifles where he was appointed as Platoon Commander of 1 Platoon, A Company.

After commissioning, Ed travelled to Nepal to learn the language and gain an understanding of the land whose countrymen he would now serve alongside. On behalf of the GWT, Ed trekked between the districts of Gorkha, Lamjung, Kaski and Syangja to document the challenges facing the communities there, highlighting the need for better infrastructure with regards to sanitation, water, housing and schooling.

Ed's journey took him over two weeks to complete on foot. Along his route, Ed visited numerous former-serving members of the Brigade of Gurkhas, now long retired and living in the hills. The impression left by the warm, close-knit communities of Nepal gave him a deeply embedded respect for the country and its people.

It was shortly after this experience in Nepal that Ed and Siddhanta found themselves together in the UK, preparing for an operational tour to Afghanistan. In mid-2012 the War in Afghanistan, by now among the longest campaigns in UK history, had reached its eleventh year. For Siddhanta, this would be his third deployment to the country.

Following lengthy pre-deployment training, Ed and Siddhanta deployed to Nahr-e Saraj, Helmand Province. 1 Platoon was deployed to the austere checkpoint known as Prang. There, the platoon conducted patrols, often partnered with local police, to try and reassure the local population and deter the influence of the Taliban in the area.

Both Ed and Siddhanta were considered consummate soldiers. Siddhanta's career had seen him serve on operations in Bosnia as well as Afghanistan. He was known as an outstanding soldier and a 'true Gurkha'.

For Ed, although this tour was his first, he had already proven himself an able officer. There was no doubt in his own mind of where his responsibilities lay:

"Of course, the biggest, most memorable event of the day, week, year, was saying goodbye to Ram Guruji, who was finally ripped out this afternoon to return home to Nepal and attend to his seriously ill father. The man, the rock of my platoon and my command had tears in his eyes and was devastated to be leaving the Platoon. His final words were "keep the boys safe Saheb". "Look after the boys and keep them safe", resonated with me more than anything else has done in my life so far. It rammed home to me my responsibility and my job. I must protect the boys, everything about them; their lives, reputation, future, prospects and, if a religious person, their souls. Everything must fall on my shoulders, the Platoon must be protected." (Excerpt from Edward's journal – 15th October 2012)

On 30 October 2012, whilst conducting a Shura meeting inside their checkpoint, Ed and Siddhanta were betrayed and murdered by a man claiming to be a member of the Afghan police. Their loss has been felt bitterly and profoundly by their families, and by fellow soldiers who had served alongside them. Days later, their bodies were flown from Camp Bastion to the UK, to be handed over to their families.

Although from different backgrounds, both men had cared passionately about the Brigade of Gurkhas and for the country and people of Nepal.

In 2015 disaster struck Nepal in the form of a fatal Earthquake that placed further burdens on a land already battling hard to provide education for its children.

In honour of their memory, the GWT is hoping to raise £98,000 by December 2017 in order to rebuild Shree Saraswoti Secondary School in Ramechhap District, Nepal, which was damaged during the 2015 earthquake. The children at the school have been studying in corrugated iron shacks which, given the school is at an altitude of 2,500m/8000 feet, are either stifling hot or freezing. There are currently no toilets and there is no running water available.

If the fundraising campaign is successful, the GWT will build a new school with 14 classrooms for 380 children who range from the age of 4 to 16. It will include male and female toilets, a library, an incinerator and water.

Shova Kunwar, Siddhanta's sister, said: "My brother might be gone but he will be remembered forever in our hearts, in our memories.

"I am very thankful for the work of the Gurkha Welfare Trust to rebuild Nepal after the earthquakes in 2015."

For more information please visit www.gwt.org.uk or www.edandsiddhanta.com.

-Ends-

Notes to editors:

You have been provided with jpeg images of both Ed and Siddhanta. If you use them please credit GWT and do not archive.

GWT Director, Al Howard is available for further information/interviews. To get in touch please contact Jo at Jolly Good Causes by email Jo@jollygoodcauses.com or call 07498 554537.

A quote from Emily Baxter, Ed's sister:

"So many people through social media and through personal contact, people in this room shared anecdotes and their own experiences of knowing Ed that myself and my family gained a rich, complex knowledge about Ed and his life.

"And we – Mum, Dad and I - continue to hear stories. These stories keep Ed's and Siddhanta's actions and legacies alive.

"We continue to be touched and are very appreciative of the significant contributions by everyone... [it] helps us move closer to our fundraising goal to support the rebuilding of a school and its community in Nepal."