

An aerial photograph of a fighter jet in the lower right and a missile in the upper left, both set against a clear blue sky. The jet is angled upwards, and the missile is trailing a bright, glowing wake.

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Some of you may be aware that Robin Adshead, a leading light of the Military Picture Library, died on 10th November 2005. This issue is exclusively devoted to my longtime friend and colleague and his images.

Derek Robin Adshead was born in 1934 and educated at Eton and Sandhurst. Commissioned into the 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles in 1954, he experienced jungle operations during the closing years of the Malayan Emergency. After service in Malaya, Singapore and Hong Kong, he trained as a Light Aircraft Pilot in 1963, flying Auster AOP.9s in the UK, Europe and North Africa. He was attached to the 16th Independent Parachute Brigade when it went to Cyprus on peace-keeping duties, and later with the United Nations in 1964.

When Confrontation with Indonesia in Borneo began, which involved his Regiment, he was the only Gurkhali-speaking fixed-wing pilot in the Army. He decided he was in the wrong war and retrained as a helicopter pilot. Returning to Malaya in 1965, he was awarded a place at

the Army Staff College at Camberley. However, he passed up this opportunity for further promotion in order to raise one of the first Air Platoons flying Sioux helicopters, which it continued to do during three operational flying tours in Borneo, until Confrontation ended.

In 1966, he raised the 6<sup>th</sup> Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles Air Platoon, commanding it in Borneo and Malaya. In 1967, his Gurkha Air Platoon was transferred to Hong Kong, into the scene of communal rioting caused by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. After peace was restored in the Colony, his unit was amalgamated into 656 Squadron Army Air Corps in 1968. He was Second-in-Command of the Squadron until he retired from the Army in 1971 to become a photo-journalist.

During his Army service, Robin had always carried a camera and a typewriter on his travels and had also free-lanced as a photographer during his extended Gurkha leave periods. After leaving the Army, he specialised in defence, aviation and outdoor leisure journalism. For some years he was a

columnist for two well-known outdoor pursuit magazines and he camped and backpacked in many countries from Iceland to the Himalayas. His first book, published in 1970, was called "Gurkha – the Legendary Soldier", which was followed by many other books on outdoor and leisure subjects, defence books, a travel book on China and a biography of the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

Robin travelled extensively throughout his life, both with the Army and later in civilian life. For two years he was Picture Editor of the Ian Allan magazine "Battle", during which time he was runner-up in the News Photographer of the Year competition in 1973, with a picture of a Royal Air Force pilot ejecting from a Harrier GR.1A in Cyprus.

We first met in 1971 and we frequently worked on the same projects, but it was not until 1989 that Robin joined forces with The Military Picture Library. Numerous assignments maintained his links with the armed forces and he continued to travel widely,



always with several cameras over his shoulder. He also became UK Features Editor for the French magazine "Raids" - we shot the pictures and he alone wrote the words, declaring that my composition was not up to the required standard! It took many years of patient tuition before he thought I was ready to be unleashed into the world of journalism. Robin had an uncanny ability to learn languages quickly; he spoke fluent Gurkhali, French, German, and Spanish as well as some rather odd, but very amusing, phrases from many other languages he had picked up.

**I**n 1963 he married Sally Eustace and had two sons, Darrell and Corrin. The marriage was dissolved in 1976 and he subsequently met Diana Taylor in 1996, marrying in Gibraltar in 2004.

**S**o who was Robin Adshead? Robin was always cheerful and philosophical about life. He could also be rather self-deprecating, describing himself, always cheerfully, with a chuckle and usually in an Asian accent, as a "Who He?". Looking back on his life and achievements, one could argue that he was anything but a "Who He?".

**R**obin was, before anything else, an extremely gifted photographer. In addition to that, he was a colourful writer and someone who could step into any culture on earth and immediately make his mark, through easy communication with the locals. When stopping over in a far flung country (en-route to Malaya, on a troop ship in the 1950s) for a night, he stayed in a little hotel where the entire party of British officers was waited on hand-and-foot by a troop of orderlies. In the morning, in the stony silence of a typical Officers' Mess breakfast, he was served a cup of coffee by a very keen and humble Mess Orderly. Robin smiled at the

orderly and said, simply, "Coffee hai?". The Orderly acknowledged with a huge, white-toothed grin and answered "Coffee hai Sahib!", before darting away to the kitchen, full of pride and happiness that just one of the officers at the table had noticed him. A fellow officer of Robin's leant over his starched copy of the Times and said, in a slow, aristocratic drawl, "You know Robin, one of the things I admire most about you is your uncanny ability to keep a hand in with the natives".

**I**t's no surprise that many people all over the world remembered him immediately - regardless of how many years have passed since their last meeting. His son Corrin, also a Gurkha officer, was on a Gurkha pension-paying trek in the remote hills of Nepal 20 years after Robin left the Regiment and every single soldier from 6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas remembered Robin immediately.

**R**obin's passions in life included photography, travel and the Gurkha soldiers with whom he had the privilege to serve for so many years.

There is, he said, a definite difference

between being a "traveller" and being "well-travelled" - and how he much preferred the latter!

Never one to drift aimlessly, he needed a reason

to be somewhere, or to travel there, and once he had arrived, he would make the most of it. He learnt, and never stopped perfecting, the art of non-intrusive photography. His son recalled him imparting hard-earned advice about how to photograph people on the streets without offending them and how to keep





their faces in focus at the same time. A hard task, he said in all seriousness, that usually eluded him 90% of the time!

**W**riting was his other passion, reinforcing what he thought his photos perhaps wouldn't portray. His photographs alone could tell an entire story, but Robin always felt that a written journal was a necessary record of where he had been and what it all meant.

**R**obin spoke several languages; he could converse fluently in French, German, Spanish and of course Gurkhali – the latter being a language that he retained even after more than thirty years of being away from regular contact with Gurkhas. If he didn't speak a language, he would always learn, and pass on, some meaningful phrase or two, guaranteed to raise a smile. Corrin was about to make a journey by bicycle from northern France to southern Portugal. He asked Robin what useful Spanish phrases he could pass on. He thought of two; "Wow, what beautiful eyes you have!" and "A brave man never blasphemes". Those phrases alone, he remarked, all assisted by copious amounts of Fundador brandy,

would be enough to get Corrin by in some shape or form. He was absolutely right!

**R**obin was born into a military family. His family Regiment was the 22<sup>nd</sup> Cheshire Regiment and his father, Maurice Adshead, commanded the battalion in the trenches of World War One. By the age of 21, following severe losses, Maurice was acting-Colonel, a rank he held in full by the end of WW1. Furthermore, he was awarded a Military Cross for riding his horse through a German barrage to take command of a unit that was attempting to over-run an enemy-held position. He went on to win the Croix de Guerre and the Legion d'Honneur. This all made a strong impression on Robin, who admitted once that it was "really quite something" to live in the shadow of such a father.

**R**obin had Army Commandos billeted in the family's Sussex house during WW2. By the tender age of 9, he had been trained in the art of knife-fighting, using a Tommy gun and throwing grenades – all these skills

being learned first hand in a chalk quarry near his home. As a young boy he didn't consider himself properly dressed unless he had a cheese-wire garrotte wrapped around his ankle and a commando dagger stitched into the seam of his shorts!

**D**uring his days at school in WW2, Robin would buy and sell pistols that his Commando friends would bring back to Britain, storing them under the floorboards of his school room. A German broom-handled Mauser pistol, complete with wooden stock and drum magazine passed through his hands and he test-fired the weapon in the back garden at home, sending a burst of bullets through the wall of the chicken shed. He managed to convince his long-suffering mother that the holes were made by mice and she only heard the true story sixty years later!

**A**fter Eton came Sandhurst and boxing, where in one fight he was pitted against a huge Maltese cadet. Robin was knocked down and broke his wrist badly in the fall. He immediately stood up and hit the Maltese boxer with his broken wrist, only then realising that



something was seriously wrong! He was absolutely convinced that it was this incident that helped him to pass Gurkha selection; the whole match had been witnessed by the Brigade of Gurkhas interview panel. He later commented that his wrist was “no longer good for playing golf, but great for opening the throttle on an Auster”.

**O**n operations in Malaya with the Gurkhas, navigation was difficult and it was all he could do to keep up with his platoon of “Smiling Mongolians” as they clambered up the 6000 feet high slopes of the Cameron Highlands, tracking CTs (Communist Terrorists). Weeks of patrolling and ambushing were relentless, but he always felt at home in the company of the Gurkhas – an affiliation that would continue throughout the rest of his life.

**A**t one point, there was a requirement to cut a jungle clearing in order to extract two casualties by helicopter. The Gurkhas had been chopping trees down all morning with their kukris to create a landing site. Standing alone at the edge of the clearing, Robin was somewhat startled to hear a crashing sound behind him – turning around he looked up in horror to see an entire tree, all 120 feet of it, coming down on top of him. He was stripped bare of his clothes by the branches and left wearing nothing but a pair of jungle boots. To his bewilderment, all of his soldiers were rolling around the jungle floor in absolute hysterics, oblivious to the fact that they had nearly killed their British Officer! When the helicopter departed with the casualties, the aircrewman asked Robin if he wanted anything else delivered on the final run. Robin remarked with rather sarcastic humour that, apart from a couple of bottles of decent claret and a copy of yesterday’s Times, he didn’t need anything else. Much to everyone’s surprise, later that day the wine was delivered, along with the newspaper. Robin’s Company Commander noticed the items, confiscated a bottle and the paper and stalked off to his basha

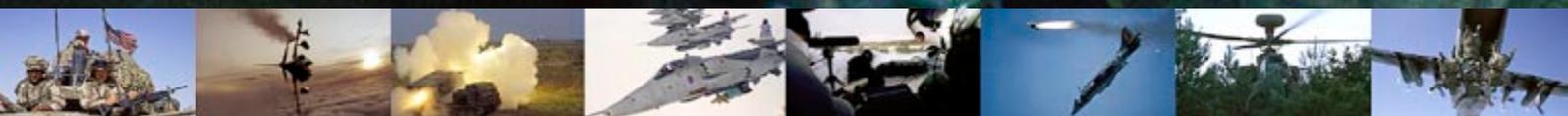
muttering something about “young officers of today...”. Years later he told Robin that he was actually very impressed with the whole thing, citing ‘good form’ or something!

**O**n another occasion he fired a 3-inch mortar smoke round over a valley, but it dropped very short and fell through the roof of a sleeping hut at a Chinese tin mine in the valley below. As he watched the event unfolding through his binoculars, he saw his military career going up in smoke as well as a whole workforce of tin-miners too. The time passed agonizingly slowly, with no sign of any movement apart from increasingly thick tendrils of smoke escaping through the thatch. Suddenly the single door at the end of the sleeping hut finally burst open, almost flying off its hinges, immediately followed by 300 wide-eyed Chinamen trying to escape as fast as their legs could carry them. “Like closing time at a Glasgow pub”, Robin used to describe it. Again, his Gurkhas simply laid down in the grass and laughed.

**R**obin was briefly ADC to a General in Seremban, Malaya in 1955 – he described the General’s wife as the “most dangerous person there, never mind the Chinese Terrorists”; he called her “Sir” once and was sacked on the spot. When he was made Regimental Signals Officer he doubted that decision and remarked that “the quality of Regimental communications would never be the same again”. Similarly, his equation for handling military accounts was simple: Adshead+Accounts = Court Martial.

**H**e was nicknamed “007½” by his Air Platoon colleagues as he was always armed to the teeth, in case his aircraft crashed inside Indonesia during the regular cross-border flights that he carried out; not that anyone particularly thought that he needed them because he held a black belt in Karate and Tae Kwon Do martial arts.

**F**ying helicopters with one hand whilst holding a camera with the other became his ‘modus operandi’





when he became an Army pilot in 1963. His flying helmet was adorned with two stickers - a smiling crow, on the passenger's side of the helmet, implied total confidence, whilst a dejected crow, on the other side of the helmet, reflected total despair! Robin believed strongly that his passengers should never feel uncomfortable whilst traveling in his aircraft, and he would go to great pains to ensure that they were confident during their flight. On one occasion, a red warning light on the helicopter's instrument panel came on. The passenger, a Brigadier, noticed it a split second before Robin and asked if there was a problem. Robin simply shrugged unconcernedly, unscrewed the bulb and tossed it out of the open door, stating that it was a simple fuse blowing. He was actually rather alarmed because it indicated a severe oil feed problem, inevitably leading to a terminal engine failure over the jungle. Luckily, the fortified jungle position they were heading for soon appeared out of the cloud and after a safe, albeit hasty, landing the Brigadier hurried off, unaware that the engine had just expired.

Throughout his entire flying career, Robin managed to take many breathtaking photographs – aerial views of a Far-Eastern world, now long gone, which he captured on film in such colourful and rich hues that it seems almost possible to step into the frame and relive what he saw through the lens all those years ago.

It was during his time in Hong Kong, at the height of the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia, that he got to know several famous photo-journalists of the era who were covering the conflicts. Robin would spend hours listening to their advice and learning the finer arts of their trade by accompanying them around the Colony on photo-shoots. He became friends with the likes of Larry Burrows, Robert Ellison and Frank Wolfe. He remarked that Bob Ellison had really wanted to fly helicopters more than being a photographer. Robin thought it ironic that he himself was a helicopter pilot who wanted to be a photographer. Robin was devastated when Bob was killed at Khe Sanh, after his plane was shot down.

Robin flew military helicopters in civilian life too. On assignment for Battle Magazine in the early seventies, he was invited to fly above Berlin and the German border, for a photo-shoot in an American Huey Cobra gunship. The pilot was ordered “not to let Major Adshead (Retired) anywhere near the aircraft controls, under any circumstances”. Robin and the pilot got on well, sharing a few beers the night before and Robin subsequently flew the fully armed aircraft for an hour and a half, still taking photos at the same time. On another occasion, on exercise in Germany, he was taking photographs of the inside of a Chinook helicopter, carrying forty troops to a landing zone. He was chatting to the pilot with his usual charm and subsequently took up an invitation to land the aircraft - before jumping out to spend the day on the ground photographing the soldiers.

Always maintaining an extensive library, he would normally read at least three books at a time, still finding the time to write and photograph, take long walks and listen to his music.



**O**n one early assignment he was strapped to the spoiler of a Formula 1 car to take photos of a race at top speed. He also balanced at the top of the “human pyramid” of the Army’s Motorcycle display team, just so that he could photograph them from above – all at 40 mph, whilst trying not to fall off!

**H**e developed a love of hill-walking, bike-packing, camping, Canadian canoeing and traveling, usually with a story in mind and always with a camera in his kit. He always encouraged his sons to follow their hobbies passionately and kitted them out with the best gear

he could afford – on the basis that if something went wrong, at least they wouldn’t blame the equipment!

**R**obin was instrumental in encouraging and influencing many peoples’ careers through his work, his books and enthusiasm for life. I spent the last sixteen years working with him on a day-to-day basis and confess that I have never enjoyed myself so much, before or since. Robin drew the short straw in 1991, covering the Gulf War, whilst leaving me to run the office and make the sales. He had an uncanny knack of always drawing the short straw which led

to some interesting assignments around the world.

**H**e didn’t suffer fools gladly and with his skills in the use of English always had a very eloquent way of making sure they knew that. “Diplomacy”, he used to say, “is the art of telling someone to f\*\*\* off in such a way that they actually look forward to the journey!” When someone did merit his wrath I have seen them embark on that journey with great anticipation!

**H**e was extremely happy in retirement at La Herradura in





Spain; but sadly he and Diny only had just over a year of married life together.

Robin lived an adventurous, colourful and rewarding life during which he witnessed, and recorded, many significant events of recent history. He was a loyal, generous and warm-hearted friend, a humorous, well-educated, gifted and multi-talented man who seized life's opportunities to the full. He may not have always had the answers to everything - he was, by everyone's admission (including his own) a terrible businessman - but he had the ability to reassure and encourage with his presence, warm optimism and strength alone.

One friend of his from the Borneo days wrote to say that "I am privileged to have known and flown with the finest gentleman I have ever met". Other friends recall Robin as "Never sad...a little crazy" and "with a robust outlook on life".

He has been described as the "consummate gentleman, master

photographer and great friend". It is hoped that there will be a permanent exhibition of his photographs at the Gurkha Museum in Winchester, as well as the use of his images in aid of the campaign to improve the lot of the Gukhas in the British Army today.

The memories that he left in peoples' minds, and the images he has left behind on film, remain an enduring testimony to the man who was anything but a "Who He?".



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