



GURKHAS, PIANO WIRE AND A BELLRINGER

Robin Adshead

in conversation with

Jonathan Eastland

'I told them I didn't want to fly Boeings at 37,000 feet, just a chopper over the North Sea. But the Medical Board said I couldn't.'

Thus ended nearly twenty years of a colourful military career which had begun at Sandhurst and ended in the Far East. In the fifties and sixties, it was probably the kind of lifestyle many schoolboys would have dreamed of. A commission, the Gurkhas, postings to the world's trouble spots, Malaysia, Cyprus, Borneo; flight training with the Army Air Corps and later, transfer and upgrading to helicopters.

In the wake of China's Cultural Revolution, dissent spread to Hong Kong where Robin was next posted.

"The Chinese had a hobby. They flew fighting kites over Kowloon. These were attached to about forty meters of high tensile piano wire."

Arriving back at Kai Tak airport after one sortie, Robin found a length of the stuff wrapped around his tail rotor. On another occasion, his passenger, a member of the bomb disposal squad, lost his life when the two went to investigate one of the first large terrorist devices which had been planted on top of a nearby mountain.

"We often flew into 'concrete clearings'; tiny courtyards between the high rise resettlement apartment buildings. The task involved dropping off a bomb squad officer; two landings and two lift-offs."

Nothing unusual in that I thought. Urban chopper pilots are highly skilled in dropping into holes in the ground.

"Aah," said Robin with a mischievous glint, " It wasn't only kites they would try and bring us down with. Whenever there was a bomb scare to investigate, the locals had advance warning. They would mass on the roofs of apartment buildings armed with crates of glass bottles. As the helicopter came in to land or lift-off, they would begin to lob these missiles at the rotor blades. Fortunately, I was never hit, but I can tell you, it was scary."

Towards the end of the sixties, the Government began planning massive cuts through the armed forces. Major Adshead became a casualty when the Brigade of Gurkhas lost 9,000 men in 1970. He returned to the UK with his wife and two children, intent on starting a new career as a commercial helicopter pilot, but a broken nose, slight deafness and intermittent bouts of hay fever soon put an end to those dreams.

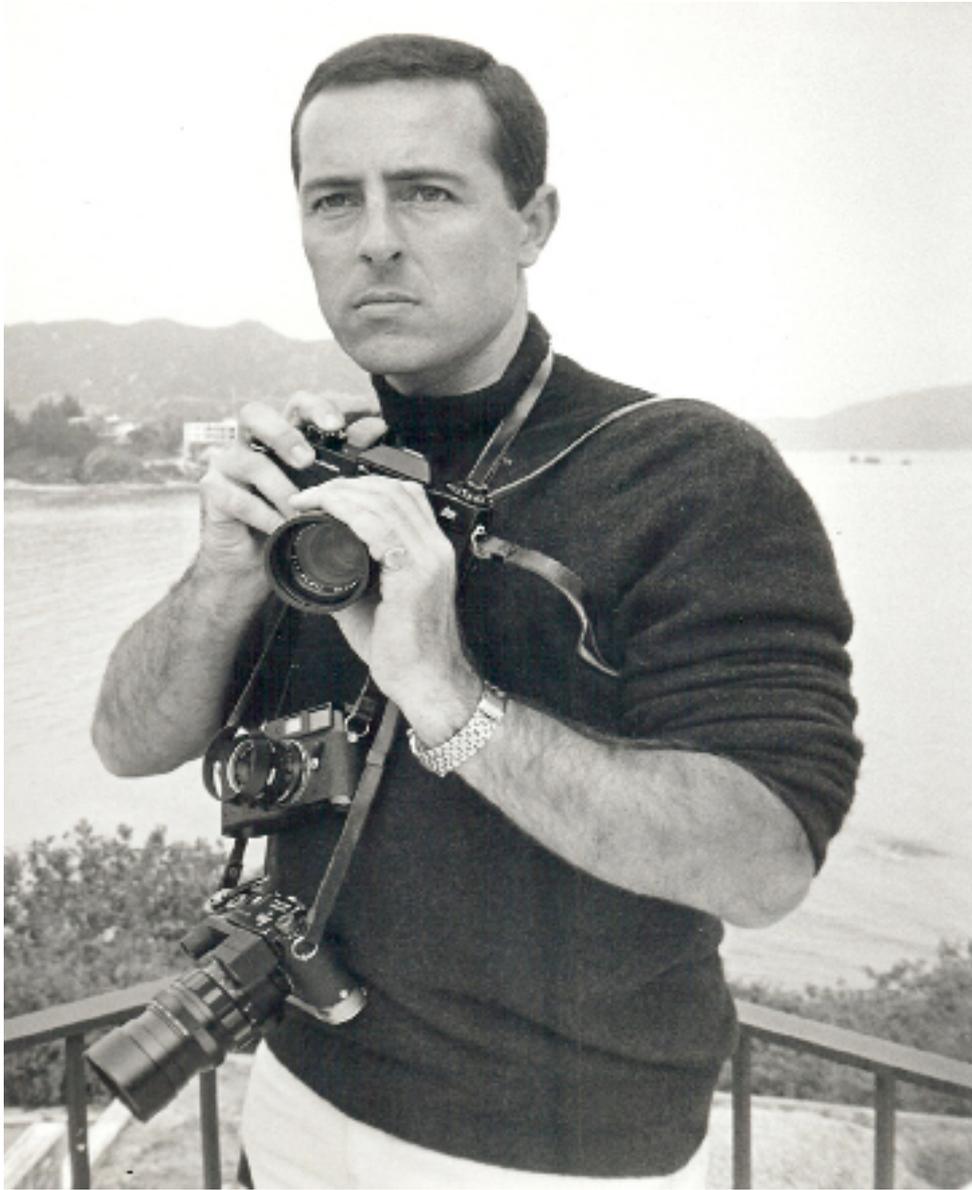
"The Medical Board told me I couldn't fly Boeings at 37,000 feet and they wouldn't listen when I told them I just wanted to flit around the North Sea in a helicopter."

During his time in the military, Robin had been an enthusiastic photographer, recording his regiment's activities wherever they went. Long before anyone had thought about doing a book on the French Foreign Legion or the Royal Marines, Adshead's photo-essay book on the Gurkhas became the standard by which others would be measured. (*Gurkha - The Legendary Soldier*: 1970; Donald Moore for Asia Pacific Press Pte, Ltd., Singapore.)

" I suppose I made it my business to document how Gurkha soldiers lived and worked."

We first met on an assignment organised by the Royal Navy in the early 70s. The first ever glass fibre minehunter was being put through its paces off Spithead. Eleven years Robin's junior, I recall being somewhat overawed by the presence of this steely eyed and rather athletically robust shooter, bristling with motor driven Leicaflex SL's. In those days, the pack lived and breathed Nikon. Then as now, a Leica marked you out as being something of an odd-ball.

More than twenty years were to pass before we met again, This time on a skirmish with the Royal Marines. As on the first occasion, Robin was not slow to recommend a particular piece of Leica kit for the task ahead, not that I needed any convincing. His first barrage had done the trick.



The beginning of a new career in civilian life had not been easy, but by concentrating on military subjects and the outdoor life at a time when such activities were acquiring mass popularity, Robin carved a niche for himself. An embryo picture library begun with the best of his travel shots from Army days expanded at an exponential rate with new material being added almost every day.

"Then, the military were desperate to obtain publicity for their new toys. Facilities were not difficult to get and they were frequently offered. Now, they charge for these capers and it can get expensive if you're away for a week."

His most famous picture from this period depicts an RAF pilot ejecting from a crippled Harrier jet seconds before it crashed at Episkopi in Cyprus. (see title page.) The rocket burn on the ejector seat lasts for a mere 0.4 of a second. That, the remains of the exploded canopy and the jet in its death dive are all in this single frame. It graphically expresses the press photographer's terminology of a real 'bellringer' with stunning clarity.



" The picture nearly didn't happen. In fact, a lot of people who have seen it thought it was faked. It isn't and it's the only known picture of its type."

Robin had been watching the plane being put through its paces at an air display rehearsal.

"The magazine editor I was working with tapped my shoulder to draw my attention to the second Harrier coming in low over the sea. I turned to bang off a frame but it didn't make and I reminded myself not to take any more notice of his enthusiasm for 'a great shot'. I quickly returned to the Harrier which was behaving oddly. The pilot seemed to be in trouble and then...wallop! It was all over in seconds. I wasn't sure at the time that I had got the burn."

The picture was widely used and helped cement Robin's reputation as one of the top military photographers. By now, backpacking had also become a serious facet of Robin's life but the financial rewards from writing a column for a number of outdoor magazines and the books which followed, was not enough. He opened a specialist retail shop in Cheltenham.

"The day I got the keys I walked out of the shop and was confronted with a hoarding over the local cinema advertising the latest showing; 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest' !"

It was a portent of things to come. His health began to fail, debts mounted and his marriage was on the rocks. The time had come to move on, to a more sheltered life in the wilds of Somerset to concentrate on all aspects of defence and aviation photography, travelling the world in the quest to help promote and maintain the Services image.

After a few years in the sticks he moved to Newbury, a more central location made necessary by the demands of work, contacts and the frequent need to visit publishers and agents.

His apartment in the centre of town is a den of photography, the walls plastered with award winning magazine covers, posters and the best of more recent shoots. Cameras and equipment lie scattered with the same abandon some people spread ornaments and works of art. There are plenty of those too and miles of shelving sagging under the weight of just about every photographic title, travel book and adventurers biography.

At 61, Robin Adshead is approaching an age when many photographers are thinking they might soon be able to adopt a more sedentary life. For the remainder of this year he will be canoeing the lakes in Canada, travelling in Viet Nam and Thailand, while frantically endeavouring to cram in a week here and another there with 'operation this or that'.

The problem as he sees it now, is not how to adopt the most comfortable armchair posture in front of years of projected frames, but how to change the course of his photographic life.



"Twenty five years is a long time to specialise. It gets you labelled and I find people, young art directors particularly, really don't want to listen to a lot of verbal clap-trap about the meaning of life. They seem to have even less time to look at portfolios. All they know is that you represent a small tooth on a cog in the established machinery and you shoot tanks. That's what you're good at." Like many younger photographers ever hopeful of doing what their hearts dictate, Robin is finding to his chagrin that the demand for what is now dubbed 'classic' photo journalism, is dwindling. In its place, advertorial photography has taken precedence over the most interesting thing in the world - the human face in the huge theatre of everyday life.

But he remains undeterred and thoroughly optimistic for the future. "After almost 45 years of close association with military life I suppose I've reached a stage where I'm simply questioning my own ability. I've never been what you might call a probing photojournalist. I've tended to go along with whatever image the Services felt was appropriate and that opened a lot of doors and enabled me to continue working in a highly competitive field. I suppose I feel that there's simply more to it and I can't deny that there are certain aspects of the job which have become, for want of a better word, routine. That's a dangerous sign. It isn't because you're necessarily not interested anymore. I love to make pictures; it has more to do with repetition. There is only so much to be squeezed out of one lemon."

Whenever time on the tight schedules of foreign assignments permits, Robin can be found wandering the casbahs or trekking the countryside with his Leicas.

"I've managed to build quite a library of travelogue material and gradually, more of this stuff is published in the right places. By the end of this year I will have added a significant number of frames to the library on subjects which, for the moment at least, are fairly scarce. When they become popular, I will have already thought of something else to do. I think my experience of a foot slogging life and the discipline it instills counts for a lot. When I go off to do a shoot, I don't let myself get sidetracked. I just keep shooting until the time, the film and I run out."

The logistics of a month's trekking in the Far East takes some planning, not to mention the fact that all these assignments require large budgets.

"The logistics are never a problem. About the only thing I have conceded to in recent months is auto-focus. I stopped using the Leica reflex cameras a while back and switched to a pair of Nikon F90s for the military stuff. I have an 80-200, the 20, 80mm and a 300mm f/4. The Nikons are brilliant; superb metering. I can cram a really useful kit into a small backpack. I do miss the Leica glass though, so I still carry two M type rangefinders.

Budgets are always a problem but if you plan far enough in advance there is usually time to get the bulk of it together from direct commissions or promisory notes. The rest you have to bank on selling within a few weeks of returning. That's the hard part and that's the bit I hate!"

In this regard, Robin is not alone. For many of us it is the idea of having to work for a living which palls. " But that's why I'm a photographer!"



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