NICK HOLT

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A Summer Plague: Polio And Its Survivors by T
Gould (Yale University Press, priced £19

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DAILY MAIL
"WEEKEND" MAGAZINE

SATURDAY 22 APRIL 1995

TONY GOULD was a young Gurkha officer at the peak of his career when he was cruelly struck down with polio. Thirty years on he now believes that salutary brush with death was one of the best things that ever happened to him

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A Summer Plague: Polio And Its Survivors by
Gould (Yale University Press, priced £1

Polio has been both one of the worst and one of the best experiences of my life. When I got it, it seemed like the worst thing that could possibly have happened. It was in Hongkong in 1959 and I was 20, a National Service officer in the Brigade of Gurkhas. One moment I was playing football, the next I was in a hospital ward, flat on my back, struggling for breath. When they lifted me out of bed, I cried out with pain. But when they lowered me into a box with a yawning lid, pain turned to terror. Was this was my coffin? Were they burying me alive?

I swore at the doctors, but they persisted, forcing a tube down my throat and clamping the box tight shut around my neck, so that I lay there like a conjurer's assistant with only my head exposed.

The coffin was, in fact, a tank respirator or 'iron lung' — and it was to be my home for the best part of a month. I watched the world go by in a mirror set at an angle above my head. There was also a glass shelf, for a book to be placed on, so that I could read if someone turned the pages.

After a couple of weeks, the Royal Army Medical Corps colonel in charge of my case came to tell me he was taking me off the 'danger list'. I wasn't aware I'd been on it. He remarked casually: 'I suppose you know what's wrong with you...' Until then it hadn't occurred to me that it might have a name. I knew nothing about polio.

I learned that polio is caused by a virus. Initially an intestinal infection, if the virus gets into the bloodstream and attacks the nerves in the spine, it cuts off the impulses from the brain to the muscles, which then wither and die. The resulting paralysis might or might not be temporary, depending on the extent of the damage.

The first six months are critical in terms of recovery, but you may make progress at a slower rate for up to two years after the attack. I was lucky. My initial recovery was rapid, and within two months I was strong enough to be flown back to England.

I had been abroad for nearly two years. Although my father had been flown to Hongkong to see me while I was still on the danger list, I was psychologically unprepared to meet my family. In my fantasies I might have imagined returning home a wounded hero, certainly not an invalid.

There were adjustments to be made on both sides. My mother, who'd had a premonition of disaster when I'd first flown out to Malaya, now had to face the fact that her son might be a lifelong cripple. My ten-year-old sister feared that I would be unrecognisable and was relieved to discover that I could still tease her the way I'd always done. But it would be a while before I'd be physically fit enough to return home.

After six months of intensive physiotherapy in hospital, I took my first faltering steps on crutches, with the weaker of my legs encased in a caliper. It was like walking on stilts. My parents took me out for a celebratory dinner at a nearby hotel. It was my first excursion and I insisted on accompanying my father on a short walk round the garden. It was a cool evening but when we returned, sweat was running off me.

At that stage I believed — I had to believe — that I would make a complete recovery. But that illusion was shattered when the chief medical officer of the RAF rehabilitation centre to which I'd been sent told me he didn't think there was much more they could do for me. I was dumbfounded. Every professional I'd encountered had encouraged me to believe that I would, eventually, walk unaided. Now this man was calmly telling me that I couldn't expect to make much more progress. I was being Army with a disability pensi was now complete: I was a c

Fighting spirit: Main picture, Tony Gould with his wife Jenny and, below, as an officer in the Brigade of Gurkhas, before polio struck

ple

As cripples went, however was not particularly unsightly. Indeed, a squadron-leader who'd lost both his legs endeared himself to me by remarking, 'Hmmm, tall, dark and with an interesting limp...'

I began to perceive dimly that there was more to life than youth and strength. If I couldn't develop my body, I would have to develop my mind. I had left school at 16; now I would go to university and educate myself.

At this point I reacted against the conservatism of my upbringing and professed myself a socialist, causing tension in the family. 'If I'd known you'd feel like that,' my father said, 'I wouldn't have wasted all that money sending you to public school.' I fell in love with a girl whom I remembered as a flat-chested 14-year-old but who'd grown curvaceous in my absence, and annoyed her parents by keeping her out late (by way of revenge, they privately dubbed me 'Long John Silver').

I drove my first adapted car, which had a notice, then obligatory, saying, 'Disabled Driver. No Hand Signals', with such ferocity that my rural neighbours were wont to mutter into their pints, 'Disabled driver? Stirling Moss, more like.'

Hankering after the old life made me choose to go to the School Of Oriental And African Studies at London University to study Hindi after doing my GCE A-levels by correspondence course. Perhaps I would be able to return to the East, with another language to supplement the Gurkhali I'd learnt in the Army. I soon realised my mistake. My interests were pulling me in another direction. So I ended up at Cambridge reading English instead.

That was the watershed. At Cambridge I took ...ing steps as a writer and found it just ...dizzying as learning to walk again. But in providing me with a goal at such a crucial time of my life, polio had done me an enormous favour.

In the same month and year (April 1959) that I contracted the disease in Hongkong, the Birmingham City and England international footballer Jeff Hall died of polio in this country. By that time, the anti-polio vaccine discovered by Jonas Salk had been available here for a couple of years, but the take-up was slow. Hall's death changed that overnight and clinics were set up all over the UK.

Not long afterwards Albert Sabin developed the oral polio vaccine, which proved easier to administer. It was used for the first time in Britain during the Hull epidemic of 1961 — the last serious outbreak in this country.

As a result of these vaccines, polio is largely a thing of the past in Europe and the Americas at least. It is still rife in India and the Far East, as well as in parts of Africa, despite continuing efforts by the World Health Organisation and Rotary International to eradicate it.

For anyone under the age of 30, polio is part of prehistory. But for polio 'survivors', polio is not a thing of the past. Not only do we live with whatever degree of paralysis it caused, we also face a new threat, the so-called Post-Polio Syndrome, or Late Effects of Polio, which range from new muscular weakness, reminiscent of the initial attack, to extreme ME-like fatigue.

My belief that my polio was not a progressive, degenerative disease was thrown into doubt. For 30 years I believed that I had put polio behind me. I might walk with a caliper and a stick (after 20 years I switched to two sticks and dropped the caliper), but at least I could walk. After university I went out into the world of work and just got on with my life.

I had also got married although, in retrospect, my first marriage was a very Sixties affair, almost casually embarked upon, after a whirlwind romance. Two children swiftly followed, and then