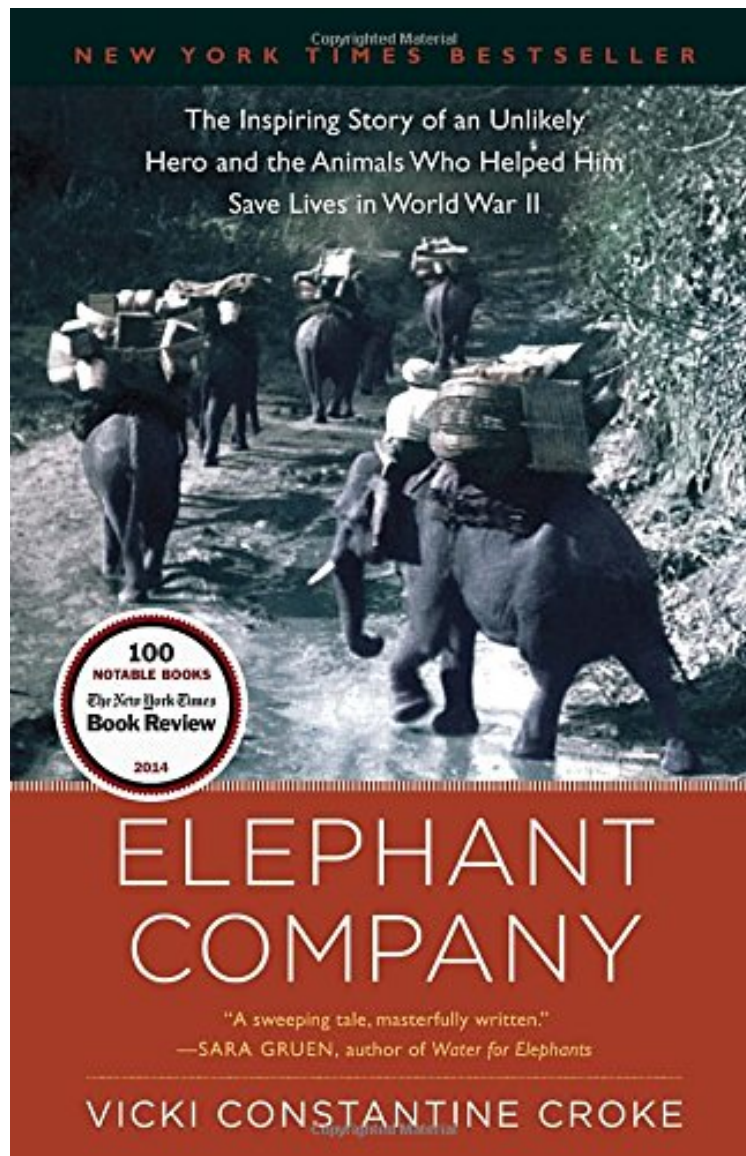


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## Elephant Company: The Inspiring Story of an Unlikely Hero and the Animals Who Helped Him Save Lives in World War II

Vicki Croke

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## World War II:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Hope, determination and heroic, loveable elephants. An historical triumph. By jdwduffy I loved this story of hope and determination. A young British man goes to Burma after his time serving in WWI, to work with a logging company, and therefore it's most important employees...the elephants. This true story seems true to the period, which stretches from post WWI into mid WWII. It is sensitive, informative and inspirational. The connection between the elephants and 'Elephant Bill' is heart warming and believable. Their value during WWII heroic. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A great read... By J. Martin This was a very well written account of a man's experience in Burma with the Asian Elephants. The prose is richly written and it provides a very interesting description of the remarkable intelligence and capabilities of the elephants. The majority of the story takes place from the 1920's through the end of WWII. James Williams is employed as a forester for a large British timber company in the Burma jungle. As part of his job, he develops a deep connection with the elephants that are used to harvest the teak timber. Williams joins the war effort for the British government in a special role (in charge of the elephants) as Japan invades Burma. He organizes the elephants and their handlers to help build bridges to facilitate the British army to stop the Japanese advance. The elephants are also conscripted during this time to prevent their use by the Japanese. Ultimately, the elephants help rescue/evacuate civilian refugees in a remarkable migration to India through nearly impenetrable jungles and unsurmountable mountains. Williams demonstrates a unique knowledge and ability to handle and get the most from the elephants and their Uzi handlers. Much of the story centers around a remarkable elephant bull called Bandoola. Bandoola saved Williams life before the war and was one of the most powerful of the elephants depicted in the story. Bandoola leads the other elephants through a treacherous climb along a sheer cliff as they escape the Japanese advance. This was a highly enjoyable read that treats the reader to a better understanding of the intelligence and capabilities of these remarkable animals. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. This book will work on your emotions. By Cbug This was a very interesting and inspiring story. Books based on true experiences always hold your attention as this one did. Being an animal lover and an admirer of elephants this book was great reading. I would recommend it for anyone especially history buffs.

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK** The remarkable story of James Howard “Billy” Williams, whose uncanny rapport with the world’s largest land animals transformed him from a carefree young man into the charismatic war hero known as Elephant Bill. Billy Williams came to colonial Burma in 1920, fresh from service in World War I, to a job as a “forest man” for a British teak company. Mesmerized by the intelligence, character, and even humor of the great animals who hauled logs through the remote jungles, he became a gifted “elephant wallah.” Increasingly skilled at treating their illnesses and injuries, he also championed more humane treatment for them, even establishing an elephant “school” and “hospital.” In return, he said, the elephants made him a better man. The friendship of one magnificent tusker in particular, Bandoola, would be revelatory. In *Elephant Company*, Vicki Constantine Croke chronicles Williams’s growing love for elephants as the animals provide him lessons in courage, trust, and gratitude. But *Elephant Company* is also a tale of war and daring. When Imperial Japanese forces invaded Burma in 1942, Williams joined the elite Force 136, the British dirty tricks department, operating behind enemy lines. His war elephants would carry supplies, build bridges, and transport the sick and elderly over treacherous mountain terrain. Now well versed in the ways of the jungle, an older, wiser Williams even added to his stable by smuggling more elephants out of Japanese-held territory. As the occupying authorities put a price on his head, Williams and his elephants faced his most perilous test. In a Hollywood-worthy climax, *Elephant Company*, cornered by the enemy, attempted a desperate escape: a risky trek over the mountainous border to India, with a bedraggled group of refugees in tow. Elephant Bill’s exploits would earn him top military honors and the praise of famed Field Marshal Sir William Slim. Part biography, part war epic, and part wildlife adventure, *Elephant Company* is an inspirational narrative that illuminates a little-known chapter in the annals of wartime heroism. Praise for *Elephant Company* “This book is about far more than just the war, or even elephants. This is the story of friendship, loyalty and breathtaking bravery that transcends species. . . . *Elephant Company* is nothing less than a sweeping tale, masterfully written.”—Sara Gruen, *The New York Times Book Review* “Splendid . . . Blending biography, history, and wildlife biology, [Vicki Constantine] Croke’s story is an often moving account of [Billy] Williams, who earned the sobriquet ‘Elephant Bill,’ and his unusual bond with the largest land mammals on earth.”—*The Boston Globe* “Some of the biggest heroes of World War II were even bigger than you thought. . . . You may never call the lion the king of the jungle again.”—*New York Post* “*Elephant Company* is as powerful and big-hearted as the animals of its title. Billy Williams is an extraordinary character, a real-life reverse Tarzan raised in civilization who finds wisdom and his true self living among jungle beasts. Vicki Constantine Croke delivers an exciting tale of this elephant whisperer-cum-war hero, while beautifully reminding us of the enduring bonds between animals and humans.”—Mitchell Zuckoff, author of *Lost in Shangri-La* and *Frozen in Time*

“I have to confess—my love of elephants made me apprehensive to review a book about their role in World War II.

But as soon as I began to read *Elephant Company*, I realized that not only was my heart safe, but that this book is about far more than just the war, or even elephants. This is the story of friendship, loyalty and breathtaking bravery that transcends species. . . . [Vicki] Croke is a natural storyteller. . . . *Elephant Company* is nothing less than a sweeping tale, masterfully written.”—Sara Gruen, *The New York Times Book* “Splendid . . . Blending biography, history, and wildlife biology, [Vicki Constantine] Croke’s story is an often moving account of [Billy] Williams, who earned the sobriquet ‘Elephant Bill,’ and his unusual bond with the largest land mammals on earth.”—*The Boston Globe* “Some of the biggest heroes of World War II were even bigger than you thought. . . . You may never call the lion the king of the jungle again.”—*New York Post* “*Elephant Company* is as powerful and big-hearted as the animals of its title. Billy Williams is an extraordinary character, a real-life reverse Tarzan raised in civilization who finds wisdom and his true self living among jungle beasts. Vicki Constantine Croke delivers an exciting tale of this elephant whisperer-cum-war hero, while beautifully reminding us of the enduring bonds between animals and humans.”—Mitchell Zuckoff, author of *Lost in Shangri-La* and *Frozen in Time* “The true-life heroics of *Elephant Company* during World War II highlight how animals and humans together can achieve extraordinary things. Croke’s evocative writing and deep understanding of the animal-human bond bring vividly to life Elephant Bill’s great passion and almost mystical connection with his magnificent beasts. This is a wonderful read.”—Elizabeth Letts, author of *The Eighty-Dollar Champion* “A spellbinding, true story of elephantine and human courage, set in one of the Earth’s most exotic jungles during the Second World War, *Elephant Company* is a triumph that will make you cheer!”—Sy Montgomery, author of *The Good Good Pig* and *Journey of the Pink Dolphins*

From the Hardcover edition. About the Author Vicki Constantine Croke has been chronicling animal life for more than two decades—tracking polar bears, Tasmanian devils, and Madagascar’s top predator, the fossa. She now covers animal issues for WBUR-FM, Boston’s NPR news station, on air (*Here and Now*) and on WBUR’s *The Wild Life* online. Her work there earned a 2013 regional Edward R. Murrow Award. She is the author of *The Lady and the Panda: The True Adventures of the First American Explorer to Bring Back China’s Most Exotic Animal*, and *The Modern Ark: The Story of Zoos—Past, Present and Future*. Croke has worked on nature documentaries for Disney and for the AE channel and anchored *The Secret Life of Animals* on NECN-TV. She also wrote *The Boston Globe*’s “Animal Beat” column for thirteen years, and has contributed to *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The London Sunday Telegraph*, *Time*, *Popular Science*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Gourmet*, *National Wildlife*, and *Discover* magazine, among others. She lives in the Boston area.

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Part One The Making of an Elephant Wallah

Chapter 1 The Shoulders of a Giant

Deep in the jungle-clad hills of northwest Burma, close to the border of the Indian state of Manipur, Billy Williams, delirious with fever, began to regain consciousness. Half dreaming, he scrambled to piece together what was happening. His lanky body felt cockeyed and unresponsive. Even opening his eyes seemed impossible. As hallucination gave way to reality, he remembered his predicament: He was stranded in an inaccessible forest, on the wrong side of the raging Yu River, during the dangerous, unrelenting monsoon rains of 1927, and he had never been sicker. His spiking fever was accompanied by chills. The lymph nodes at his groin were swollen to the size of fists, and some of the small pustules lining his feet and legs had broken open. For days he had been unable to eat and could barely drink. That morning he could not even stand. As the lashing rains tore at his clothes, he suddenly felt something that he couldn’t make sense of: His cot was lurching, as if it was trying to buck him off. Forcing his eyes open, Williams realized he was not on the wrong side of the river, but smack in the middle of it, riding an elephant through the churning avalanche of water. Around him, deadly two-ton tree trunks shot down the rapids like missiles, crashing into one another with a sound like thunder. Blinking against the pouring rain, he seized the rail of the large bamboo cargo basket, or “kah,” he lay in as it rocked him back and forth, perilously close to the frothing current. The elephant was pitched at a steep angle, leaning his flank into the wall of water, shouldering all his weight against the chocolate-colored torrent in an effort to keep his footing. Yet Williams felt oddly lucky. That was because of the elephant he rode. There was no way Williams could mistake the animal’s identity—even in his feverish state, slumped high up in a basket. The broad expanse of the gray back, the delicate pink freckling bordering the ears, and the rakish slant of the gleaming white tusks, their tips just visible from this viewpoint—this was the only elephant who could brave the crossing: the strongest and most stouthearted creature in the forest, the best friend Williams ever had. Bandoola. Williams, who managed several teak logging camps, would eventually know a thousand elephants by name during his years with the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation. Of all of them, Bandoola was dearest to him, owing to his intelligence, virtue, and strength. Williams had confidence that even without a rider’s guidance, “the great elephant knew what he was doing,” using his own instincts and judgment for this passage. Not that a human voice could be heard over the pounding water, but Williams probably mustered the breath to at least whisper encouragement. He had made a habit of speaking to the working elephants in the language they were trained in—Burmese. More than any other animal, he believed, they craved conversation. Their vocabularies, the number of words they understood, were astonishing, but to Williams, impressive as that was, there was something that counted more. These creatures could read underlying emotion, understand intent, perceive what was really being expressed. Now, verbalized or not, Williams would make plain to Bandoola that he was grateful and believed in him. The bull already knew how ill Williams was. Earlier that day, the mahouts, or “uzis” as they were called here, who worked for

Williams had cinched a cargo basket to Bandoola's back. It was an unusual event for the tusker, who was a logging elephant, not one of the small pack elephants called "travelers." Nonetheless, he had stood patiently, head held high, ears flat against his neck, as the rain pelted his back and ran off his wrinkled hide in runnels. Soaking wet, his skin had inked into a deep purple. Elephants in Burma knew how to cope with monsoon. If he tilted his head forward, his large, bony brow ridge would shield his eyes from rain, and he could keep water from spilling into his nostrils by hanging his trunk down straight, curling it under at the very end. When a limp Williams was carried out of his tent, Bandoola's dark eyes, beneath their heavy, wrinkled lids and long lashes, tracked the movement, lending him the meditative look particular to elephants. Bandoola not only recognized Williams, he knew something was wrong. This person was different from the energetic, confident man who when visiting camp invariably produced a sugary tamarind ball treat for Bandoola, spoke to him, scrubbed his sandpaper skin exactly where it needed scratching, ran his hands along his hide, swabbed ointment on abrasions, and then slapped his flank good-bye. He had nursed Bandoola back to health for a whole year after a fight with another tusker, spending every day cleaning the wounds and applying antiseptic and fly repellent. Now Williams, the elephant saw, was as broken as Bandoola had been then. The order "Hmit!" was given, and Bandoola sank down, back legs buckling first into the sludge, then the front. Several Burmese men, their colorful sarong-like longyis sodden with rain, struggled with slipping hands and feet to hoist the senseless Williams up to the basket atop Bandoola's shoulders. Two of them, Williams's closest servant, Aung Net, and another camp worker, would ride with him. As the body was passed upward, Bandoola swiveled his trunk, pressing his nostrils to Williams, and breathing in deeply. Even through Williams's clothing Bandoola was picking up organic clues, especially from the armpits and between the legs. Like all elephants, he was a master chemist, analyzing much of the world through his sensitive nose. Bandoola could ascertain innumerable facts about any animal: last meal eaten, fitness, anxiety level, or hormonal state. Elephants read one another—and people—this way. Bandoola's prodigious brain, highly evolved to negotiate a complex social world, kept a dossier of the men around him, especially Williams, whom he had known for seven years. Scent was a critical part of that inventory. Williams's transformation into a seasoned forest man was telegraphed to Bandoola in large part by his body odor. Billy Williams smelled different as a veteran than he had as a recruit. Over time, his diet and smoking habits changed, the ratio of fat to muscle shifted, and his confidence around elephants grew, meaning certain hormones that often signaled fear were reduced. The city washed out of the man, and the jungle seeped in. When Williams had an opportunity for sex, Bandoola could smell that, too. What Bandoola inhaled this day was misery. With just a few whiffs of Williams's body, the tusker processed the rank breath, the change in hygiene, and the yeasty scent of an infection. Elephants routinely help other ailing elephants, lifting them when they cannot stand, feeding them when they are unable to forage. Are they capable of doing the same for people? Williams couldn't prove Bandoola was aware of his dire condition, but it damn sure felt that way to him during his flashes of consciousness. Like all the European teak men, Williams was a nomad of the forest. He knew illness and accident went with the job, that bouts of malaria were as frequent as colds were back home. Hundreds of miles—roadless, muddy, rain-drenched, wooded, and mountainous—from any medical help, he and his colleagues toughed out such episodes. Even the most robust among them could wither and die within days of something seemingly innocuous: a headache, a cut, a chill. "No one who works in the jungle," Williams once wrote, "calculates on a ripe old age as a near-certainty." The tropical forest was capricious in its blessings and curses. Indigenous people made sense of it with a pantheon of jungle sprites that they called "nats": some cruel, sneaky, and slick, others kind and generous. The nats personified the soul of the forest. Staying alive—especially for outsiders like Williams—took every trick a man could muster. The company's numbers told the story: Williams had been one of forty-one young recruits hired for the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation in 1920. Now, seven years later, only sixteen of them were still on the job. The others were either dead, dismissed, or disillusioned. Though he knew the attrition would continue, he hoped he wouldn't be the next to go. With Bandoola, at least he had a chance. First, they had laboriously waded through nearly fifty miles of thick sludge. "Each stage of that agonising trek was about ten miles," Williams wrote. "At every step Bandoola sank two or three feet deep into the mud. Each foot he lifted made a loud sucking noise and even his gigantic powers were sorely taxed." Then came the river. Progress was slow. The churning water was level with Bandoola's chest, and the animal had to pause before each stride, feeling the boulder-strewn riverbed with his feet for his next purchase. Often, he would freeze in place for what seemed like "an eternity of time in the middle of the angry waters," as the current sloshed over his back, soaking Williams and the two men. Then Bandoola would find a foothold and lunge forward again. "His massive head and tusks ploughed a passage through the water like the nose of a submarine," Williams wrote years later in one of the several memoirs he would produce. "Riding on his powerful back brought home my own fragility." Precarious as his situation was, Williams could not keep his eyes open. The fever pulled him back into oblivion, as, step-by-step, Bandoola made his way. By the time they reached the far shore, Williams was unconscious. Aung Net and his helper pulled him from the basket and dragged him to a hut. There were still maybe a hundred miles to go between them and a station with a doctor. Once he was awake, Williams would have to make a tough decision: whether to travel overland through impenetrable virgin forest, or by water, shooting down the dangerous rapids. Either way, he needed to reach the more populated banks of the mighty Chindwin, the river where, it seemed an eternity before, Williams had first met Bandoola and his life among elephants had begun. Chapter

2Into the Jungle

On a crisp November day in 1920, James Howard Williams, called “Billy” by friends and “Jim” by his family, saw the Chindwin River for the first time. The waterway originated far to the north near the Himalayas, in the wild Hukawng Valley, and stretched for 750 miles, eventually spilling out into the even greater Irrawaddy River near Mandalay, Burma. The Chindwin, the history books and magazines promised, ran through savage country where villagers still practiced head-hunting, performed human sacrifices to appease the spirits of rice production, and could transform themselves into ghost cats. Famous explorers wrote of remote and little-known corners of the area that harbored barbaric tribes. It was enough to scare any of the new British recruits routinely hired by the logging companies. But Billy was different. Striking a match to one of his Players cigarettes and looking out over the water and the limitless jungle beyond, he was amused by such flights of imagination. A forest teeming with monsters? He knew better and had seen worse. Tall, clean-shaven, and built like a loping hound, Williams may have looked young in his freshly pressed khakis, but he had been through the kind of hell that quickly burns away a man’s innocence. Months earlier, on January 26, 1920, the British Army had demobilized him with the rank of captain. During four years of brutal, bitter fighting in the Great War as part of Devonshire Regiment, or the “Bloody Eleventh,” Billy had led other men into battle and served in several battlefronts in a wide sweep across North Africa, the Middle East, India, and Afghanistan. In the deserts of Egypt, he was part of the Camel Corps, facing the jihad raised by the Senussi, a group of Muslim guerilla fighters. Along the Tigris, he had been a bombing officer engaged in ghastly battles with the Ottoman Army as part of the Mesopotamia (Iraq) Campaign, in which close to one hundred thousand soldiers from the British and British Indian Armies died. Finally, in 1919, he endured his last two assignments. The first brought him into the turmoil of Lahore, India, where martial law was declared to quell rioting against the British. And later that year he fought hand to hand against fierce, well-armed tribesmen in Waziristan, a remote mountainous outpost on the border with Afghanistan. He knew he was lucky to be alive. Nearly a million British soldiers had died in the Great War, and those who survived were forever changed. Some obviously so—faces half blown off, hands trembling from shell shock, trouser legs folded neatly and tacked up where a leg should be. Others carried the trauma inside. Billy Williams would never write or speak about his experiences in the war, for he had a lifelong tendency to lock away his deepest emotions, especially the painful ones. The less he talked about something, the closer it was to his heart. It wasn’t in his nature to dwell on the darkness of combat. He wouldn’t mention what ailed him, only what might cure him. When he came home, he said that the vision of Burma’s lonely jungles, filled with wild animals, called to him. It was no surprise to his family. As social as he so often appeared, they knew that solitude was his true bent. He could do without the parties and pranks he was known for in school; in fact, he truly thrived in the kind of isolated wilderness that would turn other men mad. His opportunity to do just that came from a chance meeting shortly before being discharged. An army buddy he was drinking with had a connection to a teak logging company and suggested an adventure in Burma. Williams fell in love with the idea even before locating the country on a map. Clinching it was the mention of elephants. “My way has been from a very early age the companionship of animals,” he once wrote. His fondness extended to most creatures, but it was individual animals who affected him most deeply. He recognized their distinct personalities even when few others did. First, there was Prince, his childhood donkey, with whom he would wander the moors, hitching him up to a jingle, or carriage. “I developed a longing for big open spaces,” Williams wrote, “and used to talk it over with old Prince who seemed to understand.” The donkey, he said, “was the first animal with which I enjoyed a joke.” When he left Prince to go off to boarding school, he was bereft, feeling that the separation created a “blank in life.” In wartime, he “really fell in love” with his camel named Frying Pan. And of more than one dog, he would simply say, “We loved each other dearly.” When circumstances such as school or war uprooted him, the worst part was saying good-bye to a pet. It created an emotional tear he believed could be mended only by time and the company of another animal. But an elephant? Was he really up to that kind of challenge?