



# **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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**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***

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