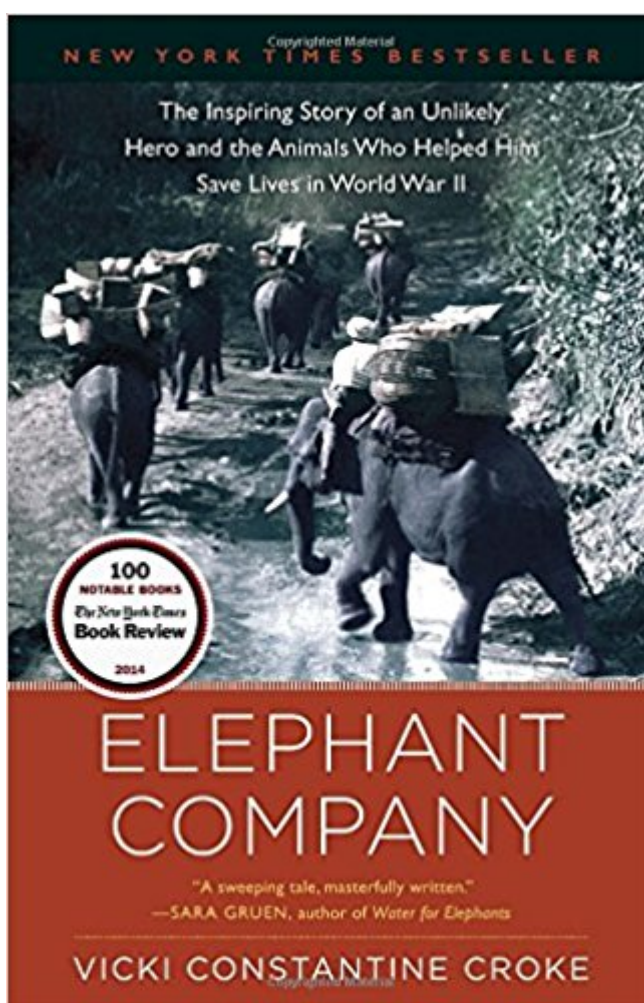


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Elephant Company: The Inspiring Story Of An Unlikely Hero And The Animals Who Helped Him Save Lives In World War II



Synopsis

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 [æcum](#) [æwar](#) 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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Customer Reviews

“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 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

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• 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.

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 A&E 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. From the Hardcover edition.

Billy Williams returned from the Great War and desired nothing more than adventure in the company of elephants. Traveling to Burma and signing on with a British teak lumber concern, he got his chance. This is such a charming story! I’m usually not a reader of “charming stories” and the military history aspect of the book initially triggered the purchase. Actually, there’s very little military history and absolutely no combat in the book. Having said that, I am glad I bought it and it really is an

excellent read. James Howard "Billy" Williams entered Burma at what would be the end of the colonial era in which Great Britain ruled large patches of the globe. In Burma, Williams becomes an employee of the Bombay Burmah Trading Corporation and is immediately in contact with elephants and the experience affects him greatly. For a man who loves animals, working with these intelligent giants is a fascination and a joy. Williams becomes a "wallah" - an elephant expert who can treat elephant injuries, direct their work and comes to understand their thinking together with his Burmese workers. It's a window into a long-gone world and how British lived in the colonies. The book chronicles his adventures with the elephants, his Burmese workers, falling in love and marrying, being involved in the Allied war effort in the CBI (China-Burma-India) theater. Although his elephants did good work building bridges and leading refugees to India, barely escaping the clutches of the brutal Japanese, "Elephant Bill's" elephants were not vital or even important. But, it adds to the story itself. This is a tale of the jungle, of a man's joy in the wilds and among animals who always had the best interests of his elephants at heart. He established "academies" for young elephants rather than allow the calves of working, female elephants die. He established hospitals for injured elephants and showed the company that they didn't need to use cruel methods of capturing wild elephants. As I said, this isn't my usual read. Having said that, I enjoyed it immensely and recommend it with five stars.

There was much I loved about this book - the relationship between Elephant Billy and his beloved elephants was fascinating, and the amazing adventures they had together in the teak trade in Burma and later as bridge-builders for the Allies during the Japanese occupation of Burma during WW II were incredible. But there was a certain awkwardness in the writing and I was confused by the ending. I wish the writer had explained why Jim/Bill had to go back to England at the end of the war. It seemed to me like an abrupt and strangely unsatisfactory ending. But in spite of some creaky writing, I'm grateful to the author for bringing this compelling story to life for us.

After reading the NYT's review of Vicki Croke's *Elephant Company*, I was so intrigued that I ordered it right away. This is the true story of Col. James "Elephant Bill" Williams, an Englishman who, as a young WWI veteran, went to Burma to try his hand in the business of teak harvesting. The teak industry was not yet mechanized and relied heavily on the power provided by trained elephants. Williams had been an animal fancier since early childhood and was instantly enthralled by the huge beasts. To say that he developed a bond with them is to grossly understate the case. His ability to understand and communicate with elephants, his love of jungle life, and his leadership abilities

combined to propel him to success as a manager of teak forests. His career development is tracked skillfully related by Ms. Croke. She has researched her subject well, and Williams' character and personality are brought to light vividly as she chronicles the events that led Williams to become "Elephant Bill.". As an added bonus, we learn a tremendous amount about elephants, their behavioral quirks, and their interactions with humans. With the advent of WWII, the story becomes downright thrilling. Williams serves the British forces in Burma in their bloody struggle against the Japanese. He is made their first and only elephant officer, given the rank of colonel, and allowed to form the company for which the book is named. The company's elephants are meticulously trained and cared for, and completely loyal to Williams. Harnessing their intelligence and great strength, Williams is able to construct log bridges for British forces with unprecedented rapidity. Finally, and against great odds, he and his elephants are able to effect the evacuation of a large number of British nationals, native Burmese, and ethnic Gurkas from Japanese-held territory, across hostile terrain, and ultimately into the safety of east India. This is a remarkable story of a remarkable man. While a life such as Williams provides a lot of "can't-miss" material, only a skilled author can do it justice. Vicki Croke has filled the bill admirably, and I highly recommend this book.

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