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Warriors

Ross Kemp

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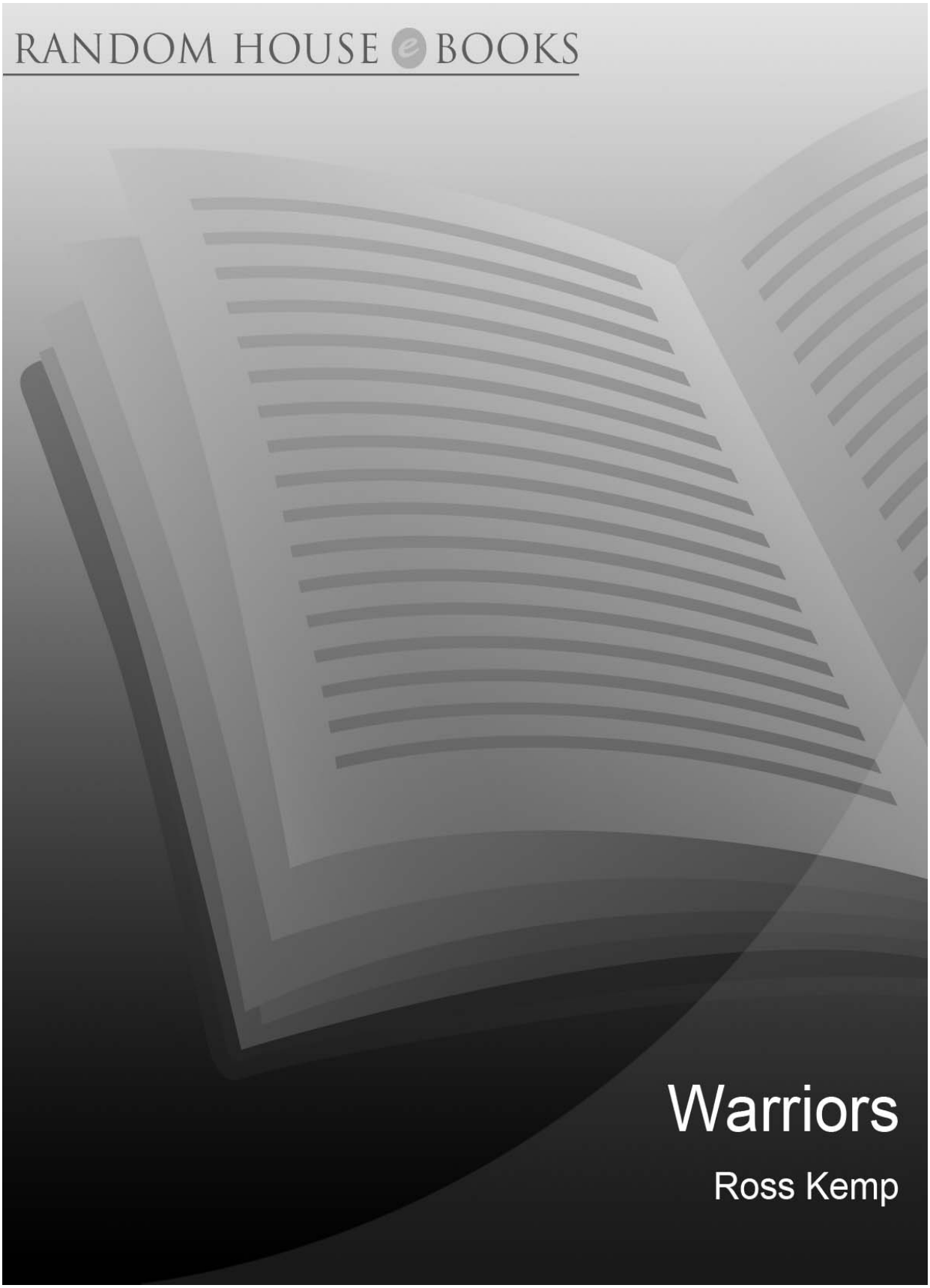

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About the Book

Ross Kemp has encountered conflict and warfare the world over, broadcasting from some of the most volatile military hot-zones. From meeting the world's deadliest gangsters, to perhaps his hardest assignment of all; embedded with the British Army in Afghanistan's Helmand province, where he witnessed some of the fiercest fighting of the conflict and was trained in the tactics they use to stay alive.

Stationed with British forces for his award-winning television documentaries, Ross Kemp has not only experienced the terror and exhilaration of life on the frontline, but also the courage and leadership of today's servicemen and women. The plight of our Armed Forces is one especially close to his heart, and here for the first time Kemp tells the breathtaking stories of commandos, medics, submariners, fighter pilots, infantrymen, sailors and engineers in daring raids, stirring last stands and acts of extreme valour.

British Fighting Heroes is Ross Kemp's personal tribute to some of the most remarkable men and women to have served in the British Armed Forces during the two World Wars, many of them unsung or forgotten. From Sgt Major Stan Hollis, D-Day's only VC winner, to Freddie Spencer Chapman the reluctant war hero who spent three years behind enemy lines in Burma fighting guerrilla warfare against troops, each account is an extraordinary tale of courage, adventure and patriotic sacrifice.

About the Author

Born in Essex in 1964, Ross Kemp is best known as one half of the infamous Mitchell Brothers in BBC's *EastEnders*. Most recently, Kemp has received international recognition as an investigative journalist for his critically acclaimed and award-winning documentary series', which include *Ross Kemp on Gangs* (2006) and *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan* (2008).

Ross Kemp in Afghanistan came about when Ross heard that his father's old regiment, 1st Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment, were to be deployed in Helmand province. Filming took place over a year and followed the soldiers from their pre-deployment training to their return to the UK. The series won a Broadcast Award and was followed in 2009 by *Ross Kemp: Return to Afghanistan*, where Ross spent time with the men of 5 Scots, 16 Air Assault and the Royal Marines 45 Commando.

Ross lives in London, is a keen rugby fan and is a Patron of Help for Heroes.

Also by Ross Kemp

Devil to Pay
Moving Target
Raiders (to be published 25 Oct 2012)

Ross Kemp

WARRIORS

BRITISH

FIGHTING HEROES

Introduction

This book tells of the adventures and celebrates the courage and sacrifice of eleven truly remarkable British servicemen. The two bloody global conflicts of the twentieth century produced hundreds of thousands of heroic acts from two generations of men, who were obliged by history to abandon their everyday lives, leaving their families, homes and careers to answer their country's call to arms. Only three of them – coincidentally, the Navy characters – were regulars when war broke out; the rest were just setting out in the world on their chosen paths. The men honoured in these pages stand out as exceptional warriors and human beings even among the multitude of heroes that our country produced in the first half of the twentieth century.

Drawn from all walks of life and all corners of the United Kingdom, together they demonstrate the unity, sense of patriotic duty and local pride that marked the general spirit of the day. There are two infantrymen, a submariner, a Battle of Britain fighter pilot, a medic, a ship's commander, a Bomber Command flight sergeant, a Royal Marine Commando, a First World War flying ace and two men who today would be termed as 'Special Forces'. Their stories take place in the trenches of Flanders, the skies over Europe, the jungles of Malaya and Burma, the North African desert, the beaches of Normandy and Italy and the waters of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

Their memories are still honoured by the units and forces in which they served, but otherwise they have been largely forgotten. In July 2009, Harry Patch, 'the Last Fighting Tommy' of the First World War, passed away. He took with

him the final living link to the Great War. It will not be long before the last serviceman of the Second World War leaves us as well, severing our living connections with that extraordinary period in our history. This book is about British warriors and heroes, but that is not to say that there weren't heroic acts performed in both wars by our allies and some of our enemies. If you meet a veteran from the last of the two world wars, look him in the eye, shake his hand and thank him for what he did for you. For they are the generation of men that sacrificed themselves so that we might live in peace and freedom. This book is written in tribute to all of them.

ARMY

Lieutenant Colonel Freddy Spencer Chapman

Freddy Spencer Chapman's story of sabotage and survival in the stifling heat of the Malayan jungle is surely one of the most incredible in the history of British warfare. Yet until very recently it had been largely forgotten. Field Marshall Archibald Wavell, one of Britain's most senior commanders during the Second World War, said Chapman's exploits were every bit as awe-inspiring as those of the lavishly celebrated T.E. Lawrence in the Arabian desert. Chapman, he said, was a shining example of a very British type of hero. 'This war has shown, as others have done before it that the British make the best fighters in the world for irregular and independent enterprises,' he wrote after the conflict. 'Our submarines, commandos and airborne forces . . . have proved that where daring, initiative, and ingenuity are required in unusual conditions, un-rivalled commanders and men can be found both from professional and unprofessional fighting men of the British race.'

Such was the havoc wreaked on their lines that, for a long period, the Japanese believed a force of two hundred highly trained commandos was at large and dispatched four thousand troops to hunt them down. In truth, it was one Cambridge-educated botanist, birdwatcher and adventurer, together with a couple of mates, who were causing all the trouble.

Chapman wrote an account of his experiences in a book called *The Jungle Is Neutral*, which caused something of a sensation when it was first published after the war. But overshadowed by the many stories of daring and heroism of our servicemen in Europe and the Middle East, Chapman slipped from public consciousness until *Jungle Soldier*, a new

biography published in 2009 by the *Sunday Times* journalist Brian Moynahan, restored him to the position of eminence he so richly deserves.

‘Colonel Chapman has never received the publicity and fame that were his predecessor’s [Lawrence] lot,’ concluded Wavell. ‘But for sheer courage and endurance, physical and mental, the two men stand together as examples of what toughness the body will find, if the spirit within it is tough; and as very worthy representatives of our national capacity for individual enterprise, which it is hoped that even the modern craze for regulating our lives in every detail will never stifle.’ That was in 1948.

The unorthodox nature of his childhood shaped Chapman the man. Born in 1907, he was orphaned after his mother died of blood poisoning when he was only a few weeks old and his father was killed in the trenches at Ypres in 1916. He was brought up by an elderly vicar and his wife in the Lake District. It was here that his rugged independence, resourcefulness, stamina and durability became evident. At prep school he regularly egged fellow pupils on to hit him over the head with a cricket bat ‘to see how hard he could take it’. One of his teachers told his first biographer, Ralph Barker, that the wild young boy was ‘completely fearless, no regard for danger’. He was beaten frequently, but that didn’t bother him either. He liked pain. At Sedbergh, a tough public school in the heart of the wild Cumbrian countryside, he was given special privileges to indulge his love of the outdoors. Instead of playing organised sport, he was allowed to roam the barren hills and lush valleys. He began to push himself to extremes, trekking and climbing for hours on end, always opting for the most challenging routes. He learnt about wildlife, how to poach and how to find his way without a compass. By the time he had arrived at Cambridge University after winning a Kitchener Scholarship (for the children of servicemen), his character had been well and truly moulded out of the experiences of a lonely childhood

spent fending for himself in the wilderness: tough, independent, fearless, spirited and at one with nature.

His appetite for danger manifested itself at Cambridge in the dangerous undergraduate pastime of night climbing. For no other reason than the sheer excitement of it, and without any equipment, he spent hours climbing the steep façades of buildings and the towers and spires of the colleges. After graduating from Cambridge, he needed no second invitation to join a research expedition in 1930 to the Arctic, where he developed a whole new range of survival skills. He ate the still-warm kidneys of a polar bear minutes after it was shot, he learnt to speak Inuit, and he fathered a son, Hansie, with his Eskimo girlfriend Gertrude, as he called her. He announced he was going to send Hansie to Sedbergh when the time came but tragically the boy died of flu the following year. Ever practical and completely unsentimental, when a bitch in his sledge team delivered pups he had no second thoughts about feeding them to the other dogs that were suffering from starvation after weeks of trekking over blizzard-blasted ice caps.

He returned to England in 1931 after a series of harrowing ordeals, including the death of the expedition leader, Gino Watkins, but twelve months later the pull of adventure was too great and he joined an expedition to Greenland where he would perfect his survival skills in some of the harshest conditions on the planet. He lost numerous finger and toenails to the cold, survived for an entire day in a sealskin kayak during a ferocious storm at sea and led a team for several weeks across a treacherous ice cap to rescue a stranded colleague. In 1936 he joined a five-man British mountaineering expedition to the Himalayas during which he and Sherpa Pasang Dawa became the first men to reach the summit of the 24,000-foot Mount Chomolhari. It was an incredible feat that almost cost him his life after the pair were caught in a violent snowstorm during their descent. Not until 1970 did another mountaineer succeed in reaching

the summit of one of the world's most treacherous and challenging peaks.

On his return he took a teaching job in the Scottish Highlands, but when war broke out he joined the Seaforth Highlanders and served briefly as a fieldcraft instructor with SAS founder David Stirling. Their small unit soon merged with Special Operations Executive (SOE), the covert organisation set up by Churchill to wage irregular warfare. The idea was to train recruits in the dark arts of guerrilla tactics and techniques and then dispatch them to all corners of the globe, themselves to train local fighters to wreak havoc inside occupied territories. By September 1941, Chapman was appointed number two at a new Special Training School in Singapore. It had only been operational for a few weeks when, to the astonishment of the British colonial authorities, the Japanese, sweeping across south-east Asia, surged through Thailand and invaded Malaya from the north. The Japanese advance was rapid, forcing the British to retreat towards Singapore at the bottom of the long, narrow peninsula. The two British Indian Divisions deployed in the colony outnumbered the Japanese invaders but, with no protection from the air or sea, they stood no chance of holding out.

When the 'Japs' – as he referred to them in his diaries and book – entered the Malay capital Kuala Lumpur on 11 January 1942, Chapman disappeared into the mountain jungles with a small group of hastily trained guerrillas, a motley collection of British and Australian rubber planters, businessmen and servicemen. He was not to emerge again until May 1945. The malaria he was suffering from at the time was a mere foretaste of some of the virulent diseases that were to lead him to death's door over the coming years. The fact that he had never before set foot inside the jungle was of no concern to him.

The plan of Chapman and his 'stay-behind party', as these small units had been dubbed, was to carry out exactly what

they had been training to do: wage a guerrilla war behind enemy lines. They took with them boxes of Tommy guns, revolvers, explosives, fuses, trip wires, ammo, grenades, whisky, cash, tinned food, biscuits, oatmeal, medical supplies, maps, books, compasses and parangs – the large, heavy Malayan knives used for hacking down vegetation and without which no man can move more than a short distance in the jungle.

With the Japanese still some distance away to the north, they were able to make the first leg of the journey in vehicles. Turning off the main route which ran north to south, they passed through many vast rubber plantations and began to climb through virgin rainforest along steep, narrow roads twisting with S-bends. This was an entirely unknown and new environment for the intrepid British adventurer and he immediately began to record his impressions and observations in the first of many diaries. As the party advanced along endless dirt tracks they crossed dozens of bridges over dangerously fast-flowing water and passed through little communities of tin-roofed huts, smallholdings and vegetable patches. The heat and humidity were oppressive, the forest alive with the chatter, song and whistle of birds, insects and monkeys.

Most of Malaya’s infrastructure was located along a passage fifty miles wide running the length of the narrow country. The main roads, rail lines and communication networks ran through the strip, flanked by the natural boundaries of the Main Range mountains to the east and the rivers of the coastal plains to the west. It was here that the Japanese were setting up their bases while working their way south towards Singapore. Chapman’s plan was to set up two camps on either side of the mountain region to use as bases from which the party would stage its attack on the Japanese. The locations proposed by local planters were only fifteen miles apart, but thick jungle lay in between and getting from one side to the other involved climbing over a

steeply sided mountain, 6,431 feet high. Chapman planned to hack a path between the two. Setting off from one of the proposed bases, the plan was to rendezvous with another pocket of British resistance fighters at the other. He was accompanied by Bill Harvey, an Australian rubber planter, and Sergeant John Sartin, a British explosives expert at the Singapore training school.

Confident the three of them could complete the journey in five days, Chapman and his two colleagues set off in stifling humidity and heat, each carrying 25lb of equipment. Afterwards, he conceded it was ‘a nightmare journey . . . the most unpleasant journey I have ever done. I had not realised that in the Malayan jungle a mile on the map may mean four or five on the ground . . .’ The hillsides were almost impenetrable with vegetation and sharp thorns ripping their bodies and hands as they clung on to stop themselves from tumbling down slopes.

Not long after they had set out, heavy rain began to fall, bringing out the leeches that bit into their flesh by the dozen. By the end of the day, the three men were covered in blood from the bites and scratches. ‘I had pulled off scores during the day and did not know any had crawled through until I felt the blood run down my chest,’ he said. Chapman came to the conclusion that it was no good pulling off the parasites because they took a lump of flesh with them. He advised leaving them on so that they fell away on their own accord once they had their fill of blood. Highly poisonous snakes and scorpions were a constant threat. Mosquitoes were more a problem down in the valleys but high up it was the clouds of midges, whose bites felt like a severe nettle sting, that overwhelmed the men. The men’s faces swelled up so much that they were unable to see for long periods of time. Sweltering by day, the temperatures plummeted at night, forcing the shivering men to huddle together for warmth. The three rapidly exhausted the small amount of tinned food they had brought and the rain quickly

destroyed most of their perishable food. From the second day onwards, the men, burning up the calories at an incredible rate, had just one bag of oatmeal between them.

Chapman was as hardened and experienced an outdoorsman as any, but the going was as tortuous as anything he had ever known. The wet leaves of the jungle floor made it extremely slippery underfoot and all the more exhausting as they stumbled, slid and hacked their way through. With no light reaching through the canopy above their heads, day after day the men lived in constant gloom, struggling to see more than a few yards ahead of them. Without the movement of the sun or any landmarks to guide them, they were in danger of walking in circles. Chapman tried to work out their position by dead reckoning but he was forced to admit: 'I had absolutely no idea where we were . . . I realised the terrifying vastness of the Malayan jungle.'

Soaked through with sweat, blood and rain and the damp from the jungle floor at night, the men never dried out. Their heavy equipment rubbed away the skin, adding to the discomfort. The two Tommy guns each man was carrying caused particular irritation. 'The Tommy gun in the jungle is a source of considerable grief and bad language,' he wrote in his memoirs. 'It is far too heavy and is covered with knobs, swivels, handles, catches, guards and other protuberances which, however you carry it, scrape and bruise your hip bone, dig you in the ribs, and still more infuriatingly, catch on every twig and creeper in the jungle.'

By the ninth or tenth day – Chapman had lost count – they were almost out of oatmeal. All of them had lost a great deal of weight at an alarming rate. One of his companions had taken in six holes of his belt. But Chapman drove them on, clinging to his personal mantra: *'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'*

On the twelfth day, they suddenly emerged into a clearing close to a village, more by luck than anything else. A few

more days in the jungle and they would have been dead. In the sunlight, the first they had felt on their faces for almost a fortnight, they were shocked by each other's appearance. Bones protruded from their chests, and their skin was yellow and mottled with leech bites and shredded with cuts and scrapes. 'We must have looked the most awful desperadoes with our swollen features, emaciated bodies, twelve days' beard, and scarred hands and faces,' said Chapman. The locals were so terrified that they 'started to hurry their children into the jungle'.

Bad news was waiting for them. The other party of guerrillas were not at the camp, nor was their large store of food and tobacco supplies. They had been stolen by a criminal gang. To their relief, the robbers had left the heavier boxes containing weapons, ammo, medical supplies, maps and clothes. Four years later, Chapman discovered that the party had tried to reach Singapore but were captured by the Japanese and beheaded.

The three men rested for only one day before they went into action against the enemy.

The 'mad fortnight' is how Chapman described the period that followed as the three men set about disrupting the Japanese advance. Working in the small strip of open land running through the country, their operations were fraught with risk at every turn. The terrain was crawling not only with Japanese troops but also local informants. The latter were happy to betray them, either because they had been actively recruited by the Japanese or simply because they wanted to avoid the brutal reprisals being carried out by the advancing forces.

Chapman's attention to detail was rigorous. The three men covered themselves in dye, made from soot and coffee, so that they resembled Tamils, the tallest of Malaya's many ethnic groups. They camouflaged themselves out in the open and wrapped their Tommy guns so that they didn't reflect the moonlight. They even inserted fireflies and

luminous centipedes behind a leaf in their torches so that, if the battery failed, they had enough light to read the map and wire up their explosives. Chapman taught the friendly locals at their camp to whistle ‘The Lambeth Walk’ and imitate the calls of the British tawny owl to make themselves known in the darkness. From their hideout in the jungle it took several hours to reach the sites of their planned attacks.

The first attack was launched on 1 February 1942 on two railway bridges outside the town of Tanjung Malim. As it was a gruelling three-hour walk from camp, the three-man party couldn’t carry enough explosives between them to blow the bridges completely. Instead, they laid 30lb in the middle of the track with a pressure switch under the rail in the hope that, when the train detonated the charge, it would topple over and take the bridge with it. They laid up in the undergrowth close by and listened nervously as a train chugged out of the town and headed towards the bridge. Moments later, a huge white light burst through the darkness, derailing the train but failing to damage the bridge. Chapman and his two comrades slipped into the night as the local Japanese garrison rushed to the scene and began hunting the saboteurs. A further attack two nights later succeeded in derailing a troop train.

The third attack was more ambitious and more dangerous: to ambush a Japanese convoy on the main arterial road through Malaya. Hundreds of trucks passed along the road by day and night, providing Chapman and his men with rich pickings but placing them in greater jeopardy. In the more exposed terrain by the roadside, fleeing the scene would be more problematic if they were caught up in an engagement. They made a makeshift bomb by stuffing gelignite into a thick bamboo cane and connecting it to a pull switch. Placing it in the middle of the road, they retreated into the undergrowth and waited. Soon enough the headlights of three trucks cut through the darkness. When the first of the

vehicles was directly over the bomb, Sartin tugged the switch. The bomb exploded in a flash and seconds later a second larger explosion occurred when the fuel tank caught, engulfing the vehicle in flames. The truck behind rammed into the back of it and the third careered off the road and crashed. The three men emptied their Tommy guns and hurled their grenades into the midst of the panicking Japanese before sprinting away into the night. The sabotage party was long gone by the time the stunned troops had regrouped.

The frequency and professionalism of the attacks convinced the Japanese that several hundred British and Australian commandos were carrying them out. Almost an entire brigade of men was dispatched to hunt them down. In spite of the risk of capture, for the next five nights Chapman, Harvey and Sartin stepped up their ambushes on convoys along the highway. They adopted the same, simple procedure each time: blow up the lead truck and then hurl grenades and home-made bombs into the following vehicles, strafe the column with machine gun fire and then slip away before the enemy had a chance to gather themselves and retaliate. The party often attacked from cuttings through hills where they had the advantage of height over their targets. Getting away was easier too as it took their pursuers longer to scramble up the steep embankments. During an attack the three men yelled and yodelled at the tops of their voices to give the impression that they were a far larger force than they actually were.

Chapman grew in confidence with every raid and at night they even began to slip through towns and villages where the troops were stationed. Chapman realised that the Japanese were not quite as good as they were cracked up to be, noting that they gave away their presence by smoking and chatting loudly. ‘They didn’t like the dark,’ he said, adding, ‘Jap sentries were the world’s worst shots.’

Ambushes were launched at the closest range possible to ensure the target was hit. On one occasion they were so close to the enemy that a grenade bounced back from the canvas canopy of a truck and knocked Sartin unconscious for a few moments when it exploded close by. Infuriated by the relentless attack on their lines, the Japanese responded with a brutality typical of their conduct in the war. Of all the many minority ethnic communities in Malaya, the Chinese were the largest and, led by the communists, they were also the most active insurgents. The Japanese had been carrying out appalling atrocities against the Chinese throughout this period. They are thought to have slaughtered six million of them by 1945 and it was the Chinese, predictably, who bore the brunt of Japanese wrath, with dozens of massacred in retaliation for the casualties caused by Chapman's sabotage party and the efforts of other guerrillas. The standard reprisal procedure was to burn down a village, march the inhabitants to a slaughter location and, while the women and children looked on, the men dug a mass grave. When it was finally ready they were all lined up along the edge and shot.

By Chapman's own estimate, over the two-week period he and his comrades detonated 1,000lb of explosives, threw over 100 grenades and inflicted between 500 and 1,500 enemy casualties. It was difficult to be precise but, from the feedback he received from the locals, Chapman estimated that they derailed 7 or 8 trains, damaged or destroyed 15 bridges, severed the rail lines in 60 places, and wrecked 40 military vehicles. Such was the success of the ambushes that the Japanese stopped using the roads at night. Earl Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, later said the three men had inflicted more damage and disruption 'than a whole division of the British Army could have achieved'.

After the fourteen-day frenzy, Chapman's party was running out of explosives and fuses and the gruelling marches to and from the ambush sites were taking their toll.

‘By now we were completely and utterly exhausted and our nerves could stand no more,’ he said.

On 15 February, the day Singapore fell in what Churchill described as the worst defeat in British military history, Chapman and his comrades disappeared deep into the jungle to hide out at a former gold-mining camp. For good measure, they blew up one last train before leaving, watching from above as a huge bright flash and a deafening explosion erupted in the night, knocking the train from the rails and sending shrapnel flying in all directions.

On reaching the camp, Chapman turned on his wireless and heard the news that Singapore, recently fortified at enormous cost, had fallen. They were now trapped on the Malayan peninsula occupied by Japanese forces from top to bottom. Immediately they drew up rough plans to escape by boat to Ceylon, India or Sumatra. Back in the UK, he was registered as ‘missing, believed killed’.

The only other British troops left on the Malayan peninsula, bar a few others who had fled into the jungle, were the thousands of prisoners of war caged in work camps in horrendous conditions. If captured, Chapman knew an even worse fate awaited him. As a saboteur, he would be tortured and beheaded. For the time being, Chapman had only one option: to try and evade the Japanese and survive in the unforgiving, dangerous world of the jungle, trying to ward off disease and the constant threat of betrayal by local informers.

Chapman, Harvey and Sartin teamed up with another ‘stay-behind party’ and together, on 13 March, they made a dash on bicycles under the cover of darkness to try and reach the coast. They were helped by Chinese guerrillas, but the breakout ended in catastrophe. At some point, the main group became detached from Chapman’s party and ran into a Japanese patrol. A few managed to escape but most of them, including Harvey and Sartin, were captured. They were taken to a detention centre, chained, prodded with

bayonets and denied food and water for two days. Eight of them managed to escape but were soon betrayed by locals. On return to the prison, they were forced to dig their own graves and were then beheaded.

Chapman, meanwhile, had fled back into the jungle with a Royal Navy Reserve officer called Clarke Haywood and trekked his way back to the Chinese guerrilla camp. Chapman grew to have great admiration and affection for the Chinese rebels. Though frustrated by the way they trained and operated as a unit, often over-complicating matters, he admired their loyalty and tremendous bravery. At enormous risk to themselves and their families, they went to great lengths to help and protect Chapman.

Soon after teaming up with the rebels, he and Haywood had set out on a mission by bike to collect equipment left at a previous hideout when they were confronted by a unit of Malayan policemen. As they pedalled away, Chapman was shot in the calf, ripping the muscle to shreds. Carrying boxes of explosives and ammunition on his handlebars, Chapman, though weak from blood loss, cycled through the night before they stopped to treat the wound. A Chinese guerrilla set about cleaning out the wound with a crude instrument made from bamboo sticks. The pain was so great that ‘fortunately I fainted’, Chapman recalled. The party then continued the final leg of the journey on foot through thick jungle. When they reached their destination the following afternoon, Chapman collapsed with a raging temperature. Convulsed by acute pain, cramps and fever and gasping for breath, of the days that followed Chapman said: ‘I felt so ill that I thought I was going to die, so I started to write my will.’ When he emerged from his delirium, Chapman thought he had been ill for two days. Haywood broke the news that it had been seventeen.

Now down to 100lb, Chapman had lost a third of his body weight. Less hardy characters may have seen the following period of time as a chance to rest and rebuild their strength

– but Chapman had other ideas. ‘I now had the most wonderful opportunity to study the natural history of the jungle.’ And so for the next few weeks, weakened by ongoing bouts of dysentery and a chest infection, the botanist-adventurer spent his days identifying bird species and collecting specimens of plants to press which, eventually, he hoped to donate to Kew Gardens. ‘I had always made a point of doing this in any country I ever visited for any length of time and I saw no reason why the presence of the Japs should prevent me now.’

Once he had regained his fitness, the Chinese planned to move Chapman and Haywood to a new camp where they would help train rebels. They set out on 9 July 1942 and, after a two-day trek through the jungle, they climbed into a Morris 8 saloon and set out along a main road. It was just as well that transport had been arranged because Haywood was now seriously ill and incapable of continuing much further on foot.

They made good progress at the beginning and Chapman was thrilled by the audacity of driving through enemy held territory in a British car, but disaster was soon to strike. Caught in the headlights of a Japanese troop truck, some of their Chinese comrades panicked and the driver swerved violently into its path, coming to a stop just in front of the truck. The party of rebels was outnumbered six to one. As Haywood and the six Chinese leapt to the left of the road, the Japanese poured out of the back of the truck and opened up on them, killing Haywood and the driver.

Chapman threw two grenades into the Japanese through a hail of gunfire, killing eight of them and injuring several others. He crawled under the Morris and then sprinted to the other side of the road, but as he disappeared into the darkness, he was hit by two bullets, one through the arm and the other along the side of his head. As he lay up behind a rubber tree, he had the presence of mind to bury his diaries with details of his own operations as well as

those of his Chinese hosts. A short, intense battle followed with the Japanese adding mortar bombs to the strafing machine-gun fire. One mortar threw Chapman against a tree, leaving him dazed. Communicating with the tawny owl call, he linked up with one of the Chinese rebels and staggered into the hills.

His dysentery now forced him to stop at regular intervals to vomit and pass diarrhoea, his bullet wound to the arm was causing him agony, his face was caked in blood from the head wound and he was half dazed from the mortar blast – but Chapman had to keep going. For three hours, they crashed and stumbled through the trees as the pursuing Japanese raked the jungle with machine-gun fire. The camp to which they were headed was fourteen miles away; they had no water or food, no compass or map. But he later wrote of the incident: ‘As long as a man is reasonably fit, the capabilities of the human body are almost unlimited.’

Hour after hour, through the night and the following day, he drove himself onwards, through thorn thickets and swamps, up and down steep, slippery hillsides. When they finally reached camp, Chapman collapsed with exhaustion. Told of Haywood’s death, he noted that all his fellow countrymen and Western comrades were now dead or detained. From now on ‘I saw no white men’. More significantly, they had been forced to leave behind all their supplies and what little comforts they had, including blankets, books and his treasured natural history notes and specimen collections.

For the next year, Chapman lived in the Chinese communist guerrilla camps helping to train the rebels. For a man of action, it was a frustrating time for the most part and he soon began to look for ways to occupy and challenge himself. Often he disappeared into the jungle for a few days at a time without a compass. Sleeping rough, he trained himself not to panic as darkness enfolded a world bristling

with predators and poisonous creatures. He went barefoot and lived off the land. He hunted all manner of animals, mainly wild pigs, but also turtles, snakes and crocodiles. He became very fit, taking on as much physical work as possible to stay in shape and pass the hours. If there were heavy supplies to be carried up to the camp, he always volunteered his services, eager to prove he was every bit as effective as one of the hardened ‘coolies’.

During one trek between camps, his legs were shredded by thorns and became infected. They became covered in ulcers, causing him intense pain and making movement all but impossible for six weeks. He had barely recovered when, knocked out by malaria once again, the guerrilla camp came under attack by Japanese and Sikh troops. A furious firefight followed with Chapman killing at least two Sikhs as the rebels faded into the jungle. For a week, six hundred enemy troops hunted for them, but the fugitives took to rafts on the fast-flowing rivers and slept in abandoned huts and shelters. Throughout their escape, Chapman suffered from a raging temperature and was delirious for long periods. At one point, he began to have violent convulsions when they were hiding in the undergrowth just as a Japanese patrol passed within yards of them. His teeth were chattering so loudly that the Chinese guerrillas had to gag him.

In October 1943, en route to the main guerrilla camp, he was struck down by blackwater fever, an extremely dangerous complication of malaria with a very high risk of death. Typically, it affects people who have been subjected to repeated bouts of malaria. Attacking the red blood cells, it causes anaemia, high fever and chills, racing pulse, black urine and excruciating pain. At times he convulsed so hard that he had to be pinned down. ‘For a whole month, I was as ill as it is possible to be without dying,’ he wrote. Today, treatment for blackwater fever includes intensive courses of drugs, full blood transfusions and complete bed rest, but even so the death rate is still about 25 to 50 per cent.