

From Chapter Four - Fighters

'New Delhi, Dec 8, 1945. The dramatic story of a female "Lawrence of Arabia" emerged from the wild jungles of Burma today – the story of a beautiful British woman who has been leading fierce head-hunting tribesmen against the Japanese ...'

In the summer of 1942, British General William Slim was at the lowest point in his life. Japanese troops had stormed through Burma, where Slim had been based, killing thousands of British and Indian forces, and sending the rest into humiliating retreat.

When he staggered into the Indian hill town of Imphal, he had only bare fragments of the divisions he had started out with months before. 'Tactically we had been completely outclassed,' he admitted. His army had rarely had good intelligence from behind Japanese lines, and been continually surprised by where the attacks came from. Much as with commanders at Dunkirk, he'd had to leave almost all his heavy equipment behind.

Most of his men had some mix of malaria and jungle sores, and longed for dry lodgings. Yet many of the British officers in Imphal looked down on them as cowards and failures. They were forced to live huddled in tents as the rain poured down and mud pooled around them.

Over the next two years Slim transformed his army, building it up for an intended assault back into Burma. But Japan struck first, early in 1944, again disconcerting him: its troops crossing the Chindwin to advance into the main pass from Burma into India.

Soon the vast British military supply depot near Kohima was under threat, as well as the crucial junction at Imphal. If they were lost, it was not only all of India that would be vulnerable. America needed Slim's region for the supply flights into China that supported anti-Japanese forces there. Without Chinese resistance, Japan would have more troops free for the campaigns against America in the Pacific.

Amidst that confusion, however, a message soon came to Slim's headquarters.

GOING FORWARD TO LOOK FOR THE ENEMY STOP
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One officer, hearing that equipment was being assigned to a 'Miss Bower' thought it all a fine joke: 'Ha ha – very funny. Who made this up?' Hadn't there been some sort of London debutante with the double-barrelled last name 'Graham Bower' travelling through the region in the past?

Slim's more experienced officers told him to shut up. Miss Bower was one of their most successful agents, now operating behind enemy lines. Her message came from within the Naga hills: dense jungle where head-hunters had until recently roamed, and which looked to be part of the Japanese invasion routes.

How could a young woman, on her own – who had, indeed, been a London debutante not long before – survive in a setting like that and help them? Her story shows what generosity can yield, so long as it's combined with astute common sense – and the inner transformation we need go through, to be able to offer that at all.

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Ursula Violet Graham Bower had been born in 1914 to wealthy parents in the English coastal town of Harwich, where her father was a Royal Navy commander. He loved taking his daughter hiking, and teaching her to shoot: rifles, shotguns, automatic pistols and whatever else he could get his hands on.

Her mother had different views about how a girl was to be raised. 'What she wanted,' Graham Bower remembered, 'was a really attractive debutante daughter, which was a desirable thing for her generation; [one] who could dance and play tennis and . . . well – what she got was me.'

The chapter goes on to show how she ended up in the mountains of north-eastern India as an anthropology researcher, and - after numerous failures - finally began to connect: not through patronizing superiority, but through true sharing. She learned the Naga's Tibeto-Burman language, and helped protect them from administrators trying to force them into debt; they taught her about river crossings, supply interconnections between their villages, and crucial building skills.

[The result] was trust, at a level which sometimes even Bower didn't grasp. At one point in her recruiting for this dangerous operation in 1944, a group of the fittest

Naga who'd said they'd join suddenly asked for '24-hour leave'. She thought that was it. 'We've got this very small chance of getting out of it alive, and I simply cannot ask them to go with me on a suicide mission. So I said, "All right – you go" never thinking I would see them again.' She knew they had every reason to believe they'd be safe from Japanese attack if they simply sat out the war in their villages.



Ursula Graham Bower

In fact they did return, and within the promised time. Most had young children, and they'd simply been arranging for guardianship of their families in the event of their deaths. 'it had taken me so much by surprise that Namkia [one of the group] said, "What did you expect? How could we have abandoned you?"' Because Bower had doubted their sincerity, 'I felt about six inches high.'

By then a small British party of young troops, exhausted, had managed to climb up from the lowlands to drop off what she'd requested. 'I never thought a box of grenades would look beautiful,' she recalled, 'one of the nicest gifts I've ever received.' There also were rifles and ammunition.

Once she had some guns, Bower's Naga friends helped work out the likeliest tracks the Japanese could be taking. This soon resulted in Bower leading an expedition to a hill above the position where three important routes converged. Getting to the top was exhausting – 'Frightful sweat, higher and higher... burning heat' – but she wasn't going to let any of her men see her give up. Once in position 'we . . . had to do the best we could for about a week. There were all sorts of refugees and enemy agents

and Lord knows what coming through all this time, and we had to deal with them.'

When it was possible she and her men simply arrested looters or AWOL conscripts and took away their weapons. Sometimes, though, the looters operated in large armed gangs, and there was no alternative but to shoot. Even with the smaller sub-machine gun known as the Sten gun the results could be messy.

'I had to collect the bits [of body parts] and bury them. [At first] I thought I was never going to manage it, but when it came to the point I was so wild about having had the villages looted that I didn't care a hoot... Word went round that we meant business, and the looting was under control from then on.'

If Bower hadn't been willing to take lives, she would have failed. But if she'd merely exulted in her power – if she'd threatened and tried to dominate the Naga in every way – the group that left for that 24-hour leave would never have come back.

The patrols were tiring, but soon together they'd worked out a geometrically ingenious system of scouts and runners – some stationary, others roaming – which gave her information on enemy sightings with optimal speed. All the lessons we've seen so far applied. Bower had given generously, but hadn't let herself be taken advantage of. And she'd listened, without ego, and thus learned from the Naga.

When Bower had first arrived she'd been like many of the Europeans, engaging in little more than a monologue. Now, like all real connection – like all real giving – she'd entered a dialogue.

The Japanese set a bounty of one hundred rupees on her, literally for her head. She tried to laugh this off, saying that since it hadn't been cut off yet *she* was the one the Japanese owed the hundred rupees to. But she also knew that a number of operatives' camps in adjacent regions had been located: some of the officers escaping; others most terribly not. Bower and selected bodyguards took to sleeping in shelters cut tunnel-like into the scrub as their work went on.

No one turned her in.