THE ELITE ALLIED WORLD WAR II GUERRILLA FORCE

Z SPECIAL UNIT

GAVIN MORTIMER

OSPREY

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PUBLISHING

This is the happy Warrior; this is he
That every man in arms
should wish to be.

William Wordsworth

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Editor's note
Imperial units of measurement are used in this book. For ease of comparison please refer to the following conversion table:

1 knot = 1.85km/h
1 mile = 1.60km
1yd = 0.9m
1ft = 0.30m
1 inch = 2.54cm
1lb (pound) = 0.45kg
1 stone = 6.35kg
1 ton = 1,016kg
1HP = 0.74kW

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Z Special Unit was a section of Special Operations Australia (SOA) during the Second World War, which itself was an offshoot of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE). It was raised in April 1942, and soon Z Special Unit was born, a holding unit for Australian soldiers who joined SOA from the Australian Imperial Force. In time another holding unit was formed, M Special Unit.

Many of the men who served in this unit were unaware (for security reasons) that they were serving officially with Special Operations Australia, and there was further confusion in April 1943 when the Services Reconnaissance Department was established, its personnel recruited from the ranks of the SOA.

After the war, veterans' groups adopted Z Special Unit as the name of their associations, and several designed emblems. They were as confused as readers are likely to be by the subterfuge employed by SOA! For the sake of clarity, therefore, I categorize these operations as Z Special Unit missions.

Strictly speaking, Operation *Jaywick*, the first of Ivan Lyon's forays to Singapore, was an SOE mission and not connected with SOA, as it was financed from London. However, that could be considered splitting historical hairs, as it was planned and prepared in Australia, and for that reason it is designated a Z Special Unit operation.

INTRODUCTION: STIRLING EFFORT

On the evening of 24 April 1940, the Royal Navy submarine, Truant, slipped from its base at Rosyth into the Firth of Forth. Its destination was Norway, its cargo six British soldiers, all heavily armed and steely-eyed. 'At Rosyth these brave soldiers came on board,' recalled the Truant's commander, Christopher Hutchinson. 'I say brave because they probably never volunteered to dive in a submarine to start with. Secondly, not perhaps in war, and thirdly, having got them to their landing place I was to forsake them, and leave them with such weapons as they had: plastic explosive, cheesewire for silencing sentries, ghastly-looking knives. I'd never seen such a bunch of cut-throats, but I must say, I did admire them.'[1]

The soldiers were members of Military Intelligence (Research), MI (R), what would shortly be re-designated the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Britain's elite practitioners of clandestine warfare. They were led by Major Bryan Mayfield, a former regular officer in the Scots Guards, and under him were captains Bill Stirling, Peter Kemp, Ralph Farrant, David Stacey and Jim Gavin.

They had disparate talents and experience, but none was as distinguished as the 28-year-old Gavin. A noted scholar and athlete, Gavin had grown up in Chile and went from Cambridge University – where he read Mechanical Sciences – to the Royal Engineers. In 1936 he was selected to join the British expedition to Mount Everest led by Hugh Ruttledge. Described by one newspaper as the 'baby of the party' but with 'a tough physique', Gavin proved his worth on the unsuccessful but gallant attempt to scale the peak. On returning to Aldershot, Gavin and his squadron commander constructed a 35-foot yacht that won the Army sailing championships.

The purpose of Operation *Knife*, as the men's mission was codenamed, was to land in Sogne Fjord, north of Bergen, where a party of the Norwegian resistance would greet them. In partnership, using the explosives they had brought from Britain, the guerrillas would then launch a series of sabotage attacks on the Bergen to Oslo railway, now controlled by the Nazis following their invasion at the start of the month.

ABOVE A renowned mountaineer, Jim Gavin took easily to guerrilla warfare and in 1941 established the special training school in Singapore. (Author's Collection)

ABOVE LEFT Bill Stirling, the elder brother of David, founder of the SAS, can be considered as the father of British special forces in WWII. (Author's Collection)

Eight hours into the voyage, the Truant hit a mine as it sailed on the surface of the North Sea. No one was killed in the violent explosion that rocked the submarine, but such was the damage that Hutchinson was obliged to return to Rosyth for repairs. The six soldiers retired to Bill Stirling's★ country estate at Keir just outside Dunblane to wait while a replacement submarine was found. 'Exhilarated by the recollection of our recent escape and stimulated by the hope of another, more successful venture, we were yet able to relax enough to enjoy the superb hospitality which the Stirlings, undismayed by the imminent conversion of Keir into a hospital, lavished upon us,' recalled Peter Kemp.[2]

But there was no second attempt. The Allies admitted defeat in their campaign to wrest Norway back from the Germans and Operation *Knife* was cancelled. Kemp said the news was a 'severe blow' to their morale, except to Bill Stirling, who saw it as an opportunity. 'It was thanks to Stirling's imagination and initiative that our partnership was not, in fact, immediately dissolved,' said Kemp. 'It was Stirling's idea that the six of us, reinforced by a few selected officers and NCOs, should form the nucleus of a new training school. We should begin with cadre courses for junior officers from different units of the army. Mayfield was to be commandant, Stirling chief instructor.'[3]

Stirling, whose family had deep connections within government and the Royal Family (his mother was a friend of Queen Mary, George VI's mother), went to London with Mayfield and swiftly won over the War Office for their irregular warfare training centre. At that point in the war Britain was searching desperately for any means to hit back at the Nazis.

★ Together with his younger brother, David, Bill would found the Special Air Service in North Africa in the summer of 1941.

The site chosen was at Lochailort in the north-west of Scotland, an area that was as rugged as it was picturesque. Stirling knew it from his summer holidays when, in the company of his cousin, Simon Fraser, the Lord Lovat, he had hiked, climbed, swum, stalked and shot. The land was owned by Lord Lovat but he willingly leased it out in return for a place on the training staff as an instructor in fieldcraft. On 30 May it was designated the Commando STC (Special Training Centre) Lochailort, and the following week the first recruits arrived. With the enthusiastic backing of the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, they were there to learn the art of guerrilla warfare, what one of their instructors, Mike Calvert, famously summarized as 'the tactics of the materially-weak against the materially strong'.[4]

Calvert was a Sapper* and had been recruited to Lochailort by Gavin, the chief demolitions instructor. Another instructor Gavin knew personally was Freddie Spencer Chapman, a gifted Arctic explorer and born survivalist, who assessed Lochailort as 'a training centre for smash-and-grab raids on targets in enemy-occupied territory, a sideline which, after Dunkirk, seemed the only possible form of offensive warfare'.[5]

For the rest of 1940 a steady stream of officers and NCOs from the newly formed 'Commandos' passed through the Lochailort course, their bodies and their minds challenged during four demanding weeks. 'It was a rather good course and again extremely hard physically,' recalled one Commando officer, George Jellicoe. 'It was practical training, some of it was deer stalking and poaching, and hunting deer . . . we had a rather long taxing two or three days in the hills.'[6]

As well as mastering explosives, students learned other technical skills such as unarmed combat, close-quarter shooting and map reading.

To his annoyance, Mike Calvert was transferred after only six weeks as an instructor, joining the Military Intelligence Directorate in London, where with Peter Fleming (brother of Ian, creator of the James Bond novels), he began planning a guerrilla campaign in southern England in the event of a Nazi invasion. Once that threat had receded Calvert was off again, this time to Australia, where his task was to establish a training school along the lines of Lochailort. He sailed in October 1940 in the company of Spencer Chapman, a man who, in Calvert's estimation, 'talked like a liberal and acted like an anarchist'.[7]

* Sappers is the nickname of members of the Royal Engineers, derived from 1856 when the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners merged with the officer corps of the Royal Engineers to form the Corps of Royal Engineers.

Bill Stirling left Lochailort in January 1941, travelling to the Middle East with Peter Fleming, for what would prove a fruitless mission to recruit anti-fascist Italian prisoners into a guerrilla unit willing to operate in their homeland.

In March it was Jim Gavin's turn to depart Lochailort.* On reporting to London, Gavin was promoted to major and informed that he was to establish a special training school in Singapore, codenamed 'Scapula', the purpose of which was 'to train all types of personnel – military and civilian, European and native – in irregular warfare'.

Inverailort House, south of Lochailort, was the HQ of the Special Training School established by Bill Stirling in May 1940. (Author's Collection)

Gavin was introduced to his superior, Valentine St John Killery, a former executive with ICI and now the head of the Orient Mission, the SOE codename for their activities in the Far East. 'The immediate necessity for the new unit was a comprehensive War Establishment, without which we should have no official standing,' wrote Gavin. 'On the 4 April an establishment of 10 officers and approximately 50 other ranks was approved by the War Office. Meanwhile the stores had been ordered, and many interviews held with a view to selecting suitable officers and NCO instructors. Eventually it was decided to take out 7 officers and approximately 20 other ranks from the UK, and recruit the rest locally.'[8]

Gavin left England by air the following month and arrived in Singapore on 28 May. The Malaya Command had selected a site for the training school, but its surrounding countryside made it wholly unsuitable. Gavin therefore chose an alternative, at Tanjong Bali, 20 miles from Singapore, which boasted a large house 'with extensive grounds on an island joined to the mainland by two causeways . . . in a very secluded part of Singapore Island.'

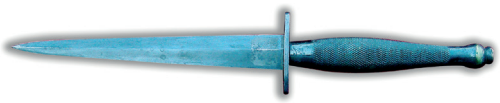
Gavin and his HQ staff moved into Tanjong Bali on 14 July, and he christened their new home No. 101 Special Training School. Two days later the main party arrived from England, and the remainder checked in on 5 August.

Gavin had his school. All he now required was to recruit a handful of officers and men who knew the area and could bring this knowledge to their training.

* By now it had been decided to establish a large training centre for the commandos, and in March 1942 Achnacarry, 30 miles east, received its first intake.

CHAPTER 1

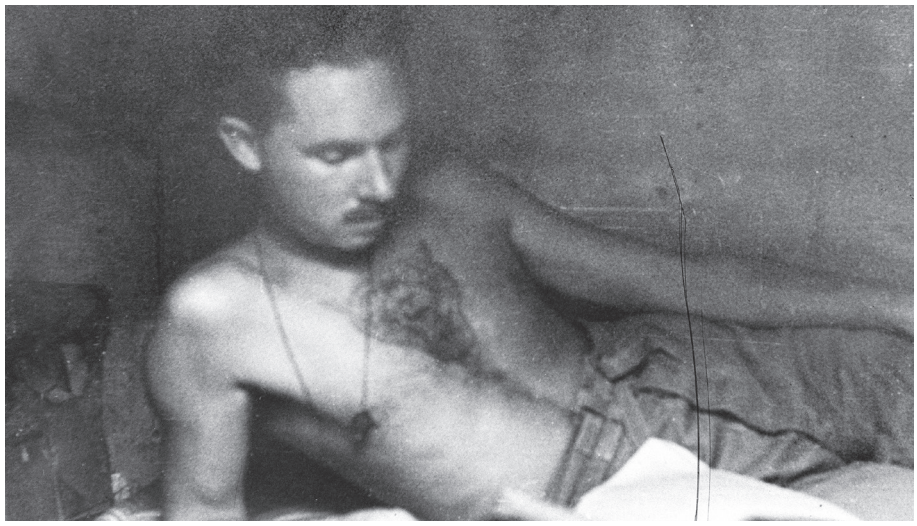
LYON HEARTED



It was only natural that Jim Gavin and Ivan Lyon should hit it off. The pair had much in common: tough, sinewy, resourceful and a streak of individuality that in Lyon's case was literally emblazoned across his skin. He called the tiger's head tattooed prominently across his chest, 'Rimau', the Malay word for the beast, and its scarlet eyes and gold and black stripes caused a sensation in the officers' mess of the Gordon Highlanders.

Conduct unbecoming of a British officer? Lyon cared not a jot. There was within a streak of iconoclasm despite a background that suggested he should be a rigid military type. He came from a long line of warriors, stretching back to an ancestor, David, who had been slain fighting the English at the Battle of Flodden in 1513. His grandfather had served in the Horse Artillery, while his father had reached the rank of brigadier-general in the Royal Field Artillery.

Ivan himself was born in Sevenoaks on 17 August 1915, and spent some of his early childhood in Brussels, where his father was British military attaché. Aged 12, Lyon was enrolled at Harrow School, where he made a name for himself as a sportsman if not as a scholar. He played in the back row for his house, West Acre, in the inter-house rugby competition, and later for the 2nd XV, and was an outstanding member of the cross-country team. He won the inter-house competition in 1933, recorded the Harrow School magazine, stating: 'The going was heavy over the 5½ miles course, which I. Lyon had mapped out with the help of one of the masters . . . the course consisted of two different circuits of about equal length.'



Ivan Lyon's distinctive tiger tattoo, the result of a night's drinking in Singapore, was the inspiration for 'Rimau', the Malayan word for 'Tiger'. (AWM 045422)

It was sailing, however, that most stimulated Lyon, encouraged by one of the Harrow masters, a Mr Gannon. On 10 April 1933 Lyon embarked on the school's 'Spring Cruise', a two-week voyage along the south coast of Cornwall. The yacht was the *Amy,* an 18-ton ex-Bristol Channel pilot cutter, and the crew consisted of Lyon and six of his peers, as well as a Captain Inskip, a retired master mariner who had served 29 years in sail. 'It has been said that this cruise, in comparison to the others undertaken by the Club, was a "pleasure cruise", but the initiated as well as the uninitiated learnt a great deal about matters that one does not come in touch with in the ordinary course of events,' noted the school magazine, a reference to the 'very fierce squall' encountered off the Lizard, the most south-westerly point of the British mainland.

It was a cruise that instilled in Lyon a love of the sea, a passion that remained with him for the rest of his life. He applied for a commission in the Royal Navy upon leaving Harrow in the summer of 1934, but was deemed unsuitable material for a naval officer; so Lyon followed family tradition and went to the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, and from there to the Gordon Highlanders as a second lieutenant.

In late 1936 Lyon was shipped out to Singapore with the 2nd Battalion aboard the troopship *Dorchester* and so began a fascination with the region that would, in time, be of inestimable value to the British military.

From the start Lyon eschewed the cosy and clannish expatriate community in Singapore. He preferred the authentic East to the artificiality of the Tanglin Club and Raffles Hotel, where officers, planters, businessmen and bankers frolicked in opulent indolence, to the exclusion of the indigenous population.

Unorthodox, audacious and innovative, Ivan Lyon proved himself a brilliant guerrilla leader. (Author's Collection)

Lyon's tattoo was the consequence of too many Tiger beers in one of the Singapore dive bars, where he preferred to do his drinking.

The British commander in Malaya in 1937 was Major-General William Dobbie, pious and austere, the polar opposite in character to the maverick Lyon. But Dobbie – a veteran of the South African War and the Great War – was also an astute military strategist, one of the few senior British officers who viewed with grave alarm Japanese ambitions in the Far East. He was also unsettled by the preponderance of Japanese spies in Singapore, quietly gathering intelligence that was sent back to Tokyo.

Dobbie lobbied London to establish a counter-intelligence department, and the fruition was the appointment of Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Hayley Bell as Defence Security Officer. Described by his daughter, Mary, as 'a strange, complex man, spiritually proud, with the heart of a lion; sometimes too strong',[9] Hayley Bell recruited Lyon part-time to his department, recognizing a kindred spirit, as well as a soldier bored with garrison life.

Hayley Bell soon infiltrated the Japanese espionage network, discovering plenty of intelligence that indicated they intended to attack Singapore, not from

the sea, but from the north, coming through the jungle of Malaya. Dobbie believed him, but Whitehall didn't.

Lyon, meanwhile, was combining business with pleasure, sailing a 3-ton yacht, *Vinette*, among the islands of the Riau Archipelago, south of Singapore. As well as searching for evidence of Japanese espionage, he learned about the tides and currents, and the customs and attitudes of the islanders.

In late 1937 Lyon was invited to join the crew of the 12-ton Australian yacht, *Kewarra,* which sailed from Singapore through the Dutch East Indies to Darwin. The yacht's owner, J.A. Gagan, was a brilliant navigator and he helped Lyon hone his skill in the art of using a chart, sextant and tide tables.

By early 1938 Lyon was fed up with garrison soldiering; it challenged him neither physically nor mentally, and he was increasingly a peripheral figure in the officers' mess. He saved up his weekend leaves in order to embark on longer voyages, sailing up the eastern coast of Malaya in the *Vinette.* Then in the summer of 1938 he set out for Saigon, a voyage that would change the course of his life.

His navigation was not yet perfect and, according to the *Edinburgh Evening News*, 'running a little off his course, he arrived at the convict island (of Pulau Condore, now called Con Son Island) on which it is usually forbidden to land'. The island, 100 miles south of the mainland, was known as Vietnam's (then Indo-China) 'Devil's Island', where the French imprisoned locals and subjected them to brutal forced labour. The director of the penal colony was Claude Bouvier, then in his second term in charge of the settlement. Delighted at the appearance of his uninvited guest – particularly as Lyon was fluent in French – Bouvier insisted the Scot stay for dinner and the night.

If Lyon had any initial reluctance to interrupting his voyage, it vanished the moment he saw the director's daughter. Gabrielle was 24. She was beautiful, vivacious and elegant, and although divorced with a young daughter, Lyon didn't care. He was smitten, and one night extended to seven as he fell in love with Gabrielle. Though she detested Lyon's tattoo, she, too was enamoured, and a few months later accepted his proposal of marriage. They wed in July 1939, and their happy day made the papers in Britain: 'YACHT CRUISE ROMANCE SCOT MEETS BRIDE ON PENAL SETTLEMENT' ran the headline in the *Edinburgh Evening News* on 9 August 1939, continuing:

> **A young officer of the Gordon Highlanders who found a bride on a French penal settlement island off the coast of Indo-China, has just been married in Saigon, say reports reaching Singapore. He is**

Lieutenant Ivan Lyon, of the Second Battalion Gordon Highlanders, who are stationed in Singapore. A keen yachtsman, Lieut. Lyon was cruising in the China Sea in his two-ton [sic] yacht, when he ran a little off his course and came to Pulau Condore, the French convict settlement island about 100 miles from the Indo-China coast . . . Lieutenant and Mrs Lyon are soon returning to Singapore.

There had been a significant change in Singapore when the Lyons took up residence in a military bungalow in Orchard Road. William Dobbie had been replaced as commanding officer of Malaya by Lionel Bond, and he took a dim view of Francis Hayley Bell's counter-espionage methods, which included the summary execution of captured Japanese agents. Hayley Bell had been dismissed in May 1939 and his Defence Security Office disbanded.

The outbreak of war in Europe had little immediate effect on the Lyons, but when France capitulated to the Nazis in June 1940, both Ivan and Gabrielle began working for the Free French. Ivan was appointed the liaison officer to General Georges Catroux, the former Governor General of French Indo-China, now the Commander-in-Chief, China, with the Free French movement, and Gabrielle was employed as a secretary in the Free French office in Singapore.

In 1941 Catroux was transferred to the Middle East, and in July that year Lyon first came to the attention of SOE. On the 15th of that month he was interviewed by Lieutenant-Colonel Alan Warren, a Royal Marine, who acted as a liaison between GHQ and the Orient Mission in Singapore. Instructed to complete a form, Lyon gave details of his background, education and qualifications. He could speak French and Malay, rated his physical fitness as 'A' and listed his dimensions as 5 feet 10, 145 pounds, brown hair, green eyes and a fresh complexion. Alongside 'distinguishing marks', he wrote: 'Tiger tattooed on chest'. He could ride, sail, drive, box, swim, ski and cycle, but could not sketch or read or transmit morse. Under 'special knowledge' he wrote 'D.R. [Dead Reckoning] navigation' and gave Australia, Malaya and the South China Sea as the regions he knew well.

SOE's assessment was that Lyon 'is under consideration for employment; he may be definitely engaged later when he will be advised accordingly'.

By early September 1941 Lyon had been despatched to 101 Special Training School (STS), where he was introduced to Jim Gavin and his second-in-command, Freddie Spencer Chapman. 'Training began one week after forming, and continued at full capacity until just before the fall of Singapore,' wrote Gavin subsequently. 'Instruction was given in demolitions and sabotage, use of

weapons, unarmed combat, seamanship and communications; and over 10% of the time was spent in night-work.'[10]

The instruction appealed to Lyon's maverick nature; guerrilla fighting was his sort of soldiering, not the conventional life of an infantry officer. That war was coming with Japan was evident, but throughout the autumn of 1941 the 101 STS was training under a misapprehension. 'By the 8 December, plans were well under way for directing irregular warfare in China,' wrote Gavin. 'For providing a fifth column organisation in South Thailand; for equipping a strong "Stay Behind" party in the new territories, Hong Kong and for fostering sabotage in Indo-China . . . war came, however, too soon for any of these plans to yield good results.'[11]

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Ivan Lyon was transferred from 101 STS to SOE (Orient Mission) on 14 February 1942. The next day the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese, who renamed it Shonan (Sunny South) and wound the clocks forward an hour and a half to correspond to the time in Tokyo.

Lyon had seen his wife and baby onto a boat bound for Australia the previous month, and most of the staff of 101 STS had been evacuated by steamer from Singapore to Rangoon.

In the two months since the surprise attack on the US naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, Japan had proceeded to inflict one crushing defeat after another on the British, humiliating them in Hong Kong and Malaya, sinking their newest battleship, the *Prince of Wales,* as well as the battle cruiser HMS *Repulse*, and finally the fall of Singapore, described by Winston Churchill as 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'. The loss of Singapore hurt the most because it had been a symbol of British prestige in the region. Its loss, and the surrender of 125,000 Allied soldiers appalled Churchill, who bitterly reflected that the young soldier of this war wasn't a patch on that of the Great War. 'In 1915 our men fought on even when they had only one shell left and were under fierce barrage,' he wrote. 'Now they cannot even resist dive bombers. We had so many men in Singapore, so many men – they should have done better.'[12]

That they didn't was more to do with weak and incompetent leadership than lack of courage and fortitude. Freddie Spencer Chapman had been urging GHQ to despatch small guerrilla parties from 101 STS into Malaya ever since the Japanese had invaded on 7 December. 'Malaya would never have fallen had I been

LEFT Ron Morris, a coal miner before the war, joined the Royal Army Medical Corps and was identified by Lyon as an exceptional soldier. (AWM 045417)

BELOW Padang, on the western coast of Sumatra, was where Ivan Lyon sailed to Ceylon at the wheel of the *Sederhana Djohanes*. (Author's Collection)

allowed to go ahead with my scheme when I first put it forward,' he subsequently claimed, rather brashly. 'My guerrillas, if their numbers had been strong enough, could so have completely disorganised the Jap attack that time would have been gained to allow our reinforcements to arrive from Australia.'[13]

Instead, he and the rest of the Training School were ordered to keep their 'noses out of things that could be handled perfectly by highly trained officers whose profession it was to learn the art of war'.

On 31 January Lyon was summoned to the office of Lieutenant-Colonel Alan Warren in the Cathay Building. Also present was Major Herbert 'Jock' Campbell, 37, once of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, but more recently a director in the rubber and palm oil business. Fluent in French and Malay, Campbell had been instructed by Warren to establish a supply route to Sumatra, but that was before the lightning advance of the Japanese through Malaya. It was increasingly likely that the supply route would now be an escape route. Warren asked Lyon to draw on his knowledge of the islands between Singapore and Sumatra to establish a staging post where evacuees could receive food and medical assistance.

Lyon was granted permission to enlist the help of one of the STS staff, a 22-year-old corporal in the Royal Army Medical Corps called Ron Morris, a coal miner before the war. Inevitably nicknamed 'Taffy' on account of his having been born in the Rhondda Valley, Morris 'had the Welsh means of expressing all his feelings in song [and] his clear tenor rang through all his waking hours'. Morris had an irreverent humour that appealed to Lyon; he was also stoic and efficient, traits that would be important for the task ahead.

On 6 February the staff of 101 STS were evacuated from Singapore on the steamship *Krait*. Lyon and Morris went as far as Pulau Durian, an uninhabited island at the northern end of the Durian Strait (about 35 miles south of Singapore), which had been selected by Lyon as their staging post. The *Krait* then picked up Jim Gavin from Java before proceeding to Rangoon.

For the next three weeks Lyon and Morris comforted and sustained hundreds of civilians and military personnel who washed up on their island having fled Singapore in any seaworthy vessel. Once they were ready for the next stage of their escape, the evacuees were re-directed to Prigi Radja (60 miles south), where Campbell had established a base.

By the end of February there were no longer any stragglers arriving at Pulau Durian, so Lyon and Morris set sail in a small boat, navigating their way up the Indragiri River to Rengat. There they met an Australian called Bill Reynolds, another of the unconventional characters that often come to the fore in a time

of military crisis. The 49-year-old, a naval veteran of the Great War, had worked in the Malayan mining industry in the 1930s, where he spent his free time hunting tigers and also, it was rumoured, spying for MI6.

Reynolds was now in the same line of work as Lyon, collecting stragglers from Singapore, and in total he had rescued more than 1,000 people. He was about to embark on an intelligence-gathering operation but, before he set off, he arranged for a car to drive Morris and Lyon to Padang on the western coast of Sumatra. They arrived on 2 March, and made their way to the Oranje Hotel, where Lieutenant-Colonel Warren was trying to bring some semblance of order to the chaotic scenes at the port as 2,000 frightened soldiers and civilians clamoured to board the remaining vessels before the Japanese arrived. He had also to contend with the Dutch authorities, who officially ran the town, and who on 7 March – with the Japanese only 50 miles away – decided to prevent any further evacuation by the British in the hope of currying favour with the new dominant force in the region. One of the last vessels to leave contained several SOE personnel, mostly other ranks, among whom was Taffy Morris.

Warren, however, had been told of one vessel moored 7 miles up the coast, the *Sederhana Djohanes* (Simple Jack), a 65-foot Malay prahu. He had bought it with the last of the funds from the GHQ account, and the intention was to sail it 1,500 miles across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon. The dilemma that Warren faced was in deciding who merited a place on the small vessel. 'This boat was capable of taking twenty people on board and therefore [Warren] would, when the time came, choose such British officers as were in the port and choose from among them the ones he considered would be best for the war effort in the future,'[14] said Richard Broome, a member of SOE, who had worked under Warren in Singapore.

The selection had been discreet; panic was rife in Padang and Warren feared if word got out that there was a boat about to depart there would be pandemonium. He had decided to remain, believing it his duty as a senior officer to continue to command the demoralized men. Among those chosen by Warren were Ivan Lyon, Jock Campbell, Richard Broome and John Davis, a former policeman in Malaya who had been recruited by SOE. 'I was sent to stay on board and Davis was left on shore to make the final arrangements to get these officers off,' said Broome. 'When the Japanese had already invaded Sumatra and things looked pretty desperate, Davis appeared with these picked officers . . . and he brought with him a written order from Warren to me to take charge of this prahu to Ceylon.'[15]

For such a formidable undertaking, the *Sederhana Djohanes* was alarmingly under-equipped. With one short mast and one long, the vessel had been built to trade the length of the Sumatran coast, not cross the Indian Ocean. Described as 'broad in the beam and bucket-shaped amidships with an 18-inch freeboard',[16] *Sederhana Djohanes* had a mainsail, mizzen, staysail and jib, but the sails were so thin, recalled one of the passengers, it was possible 'to see the stars through them'. The navigational aids were similarly sparse: one chart of Sumatra's west coast, a sextant but no chronometer. They would have to use a wristwatch. As for traversing the Indian Ocean, all they had was a small wind map ripped from a pocket dictionary.

The men – 18 in total – assembled on the *Sederhana Djohanes* in the early hours of 8 March, whereupon Broome briefed them about the scale of their challenge. They had a limited quantity of food, only basic medical equipment, a couple of Lewis machine guns and 140 gallons of water stored in large drums, earthenware jugs and fuel tins. 'We never knew how long this trip was going to take us so we had to reckon for forty odd days and had to ration our water accordingly,' recalled Broome. 'We had one pint per day per head in this ration, which was to cover any kind of cooking you could do and all necessities.'[17]

Broome asked who had sailing experience; not the messing-about-on-a-river type but proper seafaring knowledge. There were a couple of Royal Navy officers among the party, but the two who stood out were Lyon – described by Broome as 'a very good lone yachtsman . . . a very good asset to our company' – and a merchant seaman called Garth Gorham, a skilled navigator.

The wind was kind to them on the first day at sea, 9 March, enabling them to cover nearly 40 miles. Spirits were high, buoyed by the adrenaline of embarking on such a bold venture. The *Sederhana Djohanes* also gave cause for optimism. 'The boat itself was extraordinarily good, awfully well constructed,' said Broome. 'Made of teak and she was ballasted with pebbles, it consisted of one huge hole covered with a penthouse roof, a poop astern and a small fo'c'sle which would each hold about four or five chaps but there always had to be people down below.'[18]

Among those on board the *Sederhana Djohanes* was an artillery major called Geoffrey Rowley-Conwy (later the Lord Longford), who had escaped from Singapore in a junk. He found Lyon a 'reassuring figure' at the helm; utterly focused on the task in hand, he bantered little with his companions, instead puffing on his pipe while 'staring beyond the line of the horizon into the closed country of his own thoughts'.[19] The pair made occasional small talk and Lyon described some of his past sailing experience: the cruise along the Cornish coast

while a schoolboy at Harrow, a voyage from Munich to Dubrovnik in a sailing canoe, the trip from Singapore to Australia and the time he landed himself a wife en route to Saigon.

The tranquillity of the first day soon vanished as the weather turned, and the boom broke in the teeth of a fierce storm. Then one of the sails ripped. These were setbacks that could be rectified. More threatening were the coral reefs they had to negotiate on the west coast of Sumatra, an obstacle that Lyon skilfully circumvented. What they feared above all else, however, was not a natural foe. 'While we were in aircraft range of Sumatra we had Japanese reconnaissance aircraft over every day,' said Broome. He had organized a drill for such an event, which was for all the Europeans to go below decks while the two Malays (John Davis's police colleague and Broome's batman) would remain on deck in the hope the enemy pilot would mistake them for fishermen. 'All went well until one day this machine came over, swooped down and started firing, about three bursts,' said Broome. 'By the grace of god no one was hit. One or two bullets came through the deck but were stopped by the pebble ballast.'

Once they were well away from Sumatra the weather was capricious. A sudden storm might descend, followed by days of hot windless tedium. There was no space for the men to escape from their companions if they wanted some solitude. Hunger and thirst further chafed nerves. 'Our morale was usually pretty high except when we had contrary winds,' said Broome.

By early April they had covered over half the distance, but their doctor, Major Davies of the RAMC, was concerned at the state of some of the men. 'Sepsis is the main cause of my worries,' he wrote in his diary. 'The lesions are either fulminating ulcers resulting from trauma or a generalised eruption of vesicles and pustules usually in the axillae, belt areas, groin and buttocks.'[20]

The *Sederhana Djohanes* was similarly run down, the copper that lined the outside of the hull peeling away, making the vessel ever more vulnerable. Then on 12 April Gorham spotted what at first glance appeared to be a cloud on the horizon. He looked harder. It wasn't a cloud; it was land. To be precise, it was the 7,300-foot Adam's Peak on Ceylon.

The men's jubilation was short-lived. 'The great problem arose of what to do,' said Broome. 'We had no charts of the Ceylon coast and none of us knew the first thing about what the east coast of Ceylon was like. Those of us who had some experience of yachting or sailing knew we had to be jolly careful because if we carried on sailing straight for Ceylon we might strike a rock and the whole enterprise would be wasted.'[21]

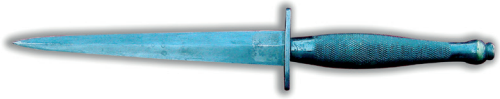
Lyon and Gorham advised Broome that the prudent course was to sail round the south coast of Ceylon to a port called Hambantota. Broome agreed, but the decision not to take the shortest route to land 'rather upset the morale . . . there was considerable dissent at this decision'. The men's mood deteriorated further when dawn broke on 13 April; land had disappeared because a rising south-westerly wind was pushing them back out into the Indian Ocean.

Lyon fought manfully against the wind for the next 36 hours, coaxing the *Sederhana Djohanes* back towards Ceylon, close enough for them to see the distant palm trees – and the size of the sheer cliffs against which the surf smashed. Morale plummeted, but soon soared when a vessel was spotted. The men – except Lyon – were so shattered that they no longer cared if it was friend or foe. But their luck was in. From the bridge of the cargo ship, the *Anglo-Canadian*, its skipper, David Williams, observed the curious craft heading in his direction. 'We made every kind of signal we could but they were suspicious,' said Broome. 'But eventually they came close and knew we were all right.'

The whole ship's company cheered the 18 men on board as they climbed unaided up a 30-foot rope ladder. The last to leave the *Sederhana Djohanes* was the man responsible more than any other for bringing them safely through their ordeal. Ivan Lyon had piloted the creaking craft 1,500 miles in 36 days and 13 hours in an outstanding feat of seamanship.

CHAPTER 2

OPERATION *JAYWICK*



The rescued men of the *Sederhana Djohanes* recovered their strength in the luxurious splendour of the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. It was a brief interlude of indolence. They soon embarked on new adventures and only Lyon and Campbell were left in India. Neither was in particularly high spirits despite their magnificent accomplishment in crossing the Indian Ocean. It had been their own 'Dunkirk', a testament to their pluck and initiative, but that could not conceal the humiliating retreat from the enemy. Lyon had seethed with resentment from the moment he had left Singapore, but his imagination had been fired by his anger and a plan was now taking shape in his head. He shared it with Campbell in Bombay and then, as if destiny was validating his idea, whom should he encounter in Bombay but Bill Reynolds, the irascible Australian he had last seen at Rengat on the Indragiri River at the end of February?

Reynolds had some tale to tell. On leaving Rengat he had sailed his 70-foot Japanese coaster called *Kofuku Maru* up the Sumatra coast, through the Malacca Straits and across the Indian Ocean. The diesel engine had coughed and spluttered like an old man with asthma, but somehow Reynolds and his skeleton Chinese crew had nursed her to India.

Over a beer Lyon outlined his plan to Reynolds: he would lead a small team of guerrillas in canoes into Singapore Harbour, where they would sink Japanese