

## **An Extract from Operation Banyan**

By

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**Book 8 of the Carter's Commandos series.**

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Carter elected to lead them east, but only because they had concealed the vehicles on the left-hand side of the road. Using hand gestures, Carter explained to Han what he planned to do. The little Dayak smiled and bobbed his head in understanding, then disappeared into the undergrowth so quickly Carter wondered if the ground had opened up and swallowed him.

Untying the feet of the two prisoners, they were prodded into the middle of a single file and Carter gave the order to move forward. Chin Peng and Jim were reluctant to do so and it took threats of violence from Paddy O'Driscoll to make them change their minds.

"Don't think we won't just shoot youz and leave youz here." He said, exaggerating his Irish accent and waving the barrel of his Sten gun under Chin Peng's nose. "Our orders were to bring youz in 'dead or alive', so it makes no difference to us. And as for you ..."

O'Driscoll turned his attention to Jim "We'll be saving the hangman a job if we just finish yez here." He gave a broad Irish smile. "But maybe youz'll be able to save your neck if you co-operate, so it would be a shame for yez to lose the chance to save your own skin."

Both men were gagged, to prevent them calling for help, so they were unable to reply. But the looks of disdain, in the case of Chin Peng and fear, in the case of Jim, were evident on their faces.

But the threats did their work and the two prisoners were more co-operative as they headed further east, angling towards the point in the jungle where Carter estimated the border fence might end. Rather than try to force a passage, they followed a series of twisting paths made by animals. But the paths were narrow and the men's thin clothing was nowhere near as good as animal hides at preventing cuts from thorns and the sharp edges of sword grass. They stifled curses as their clothing snagged and their skin was rent.

Even though the Sun had long set, the heat of the day persisted, trapped beneath the jungle's canopy. But it was the humidity that made it worse. The khaki of their uniforms was stained black by their sweat.

They had failed to find anywhere along the road where they could replenish their water stocks. Carter had hoped to find a petrol station, closed up for the night but with a tap where drivers could fill up their car's radiators. But, apart from the odd house, they had seen nothing. Carter had been tempted to stop and try to sneak up to one of the water butts that stored the domestic supplies, filled by the runoff from the atap thatched roofs, but decided the risk was too high. He had been in Thailand for long enough to know that most of the houses were home to a guard dog to alert the occupants to intruders.

So, they called on the depths of strength they had learnt to tap into back during their wartime training and tried to ignore their raging thirst. Han would be suffering as well and Carter knew that if anyone could find them a water supply, it would be their guide.

After an hour Carter gave the order to halt. In that time a commando could walk four miles carrying eighty pounds of kit, but in the jungle Carter estimated they had gone no more than half a mile in a straight line.

“Ten minutes, then we’ll try to cut south.” He whispered.

On their journey north, as prisoners, they had passed close enough to the border fence to see that there were watch towers dotted along the fence, standing opposite each other on both the Malay and Thai sides of the border as the two sides erected tit-for-tat measures to show that neither would be outdone by the other. Carter doubted they would be permanently manned, but he couldn’t take the risk. Although he hadn’t actually seen how the fences were terminated, it would make sense for there to be a watchtower, so that any final guard could view the approach for some distance past the end. That meant moving even further east, but that depended on knowing they had actually reached the fence. If they didn’t find the fence, it meant they had already passed the end of it.

They continued to force their way along the paths, intersecting with one that was broader, but heading in the right direction. To Carter’s experienced feet, it felt well-trodden and not just by animals. A smugglers route, perhaps.

Or maybe one used by CTs passing to and from Chin Peng’s HQ.

If that were the case, there was a risk they might run into someone at any moment. It would be a hell of a coincidence. Not really a coincidence, more just bad timing. It wouldn’t be a coincidence, because the CTs quite clearly used that route.

Carter had just taken over the lead from Danny Glass when he heard a hiss from out of the darkness. He pulled up so quickly that Prof Green, behind him, banged into his back.

Carter lowered himself onto one knee, making himself a smaller target. Behind him he could hear the others doing the same.

“Who’s there?” he hissed into the void of the jungle.

There was the pad of unshod feet then Carter felt a hand on his arm. “Han!” came the reply. Carter relaxed a little.

“Come!”. The small man commanded; one of the few English words he knew, other than food and water.

If Han thought it was OK to continue to use the track, then it probably was. Carter put his trust in the little man and followed him along the path.

After a few minutes, Han stopped then directed them off the path and into a clearing. No, Carter realised. It wasn’t a clearing. It was some sort of valley formed by a stream. He could hear it gurgling and chattering over stones. The sound of the water was so tempting to their ears.

But it could be a death sentence just to rush forward and start drinking. Who knew what parasites or bacteria the stream harboured? Animals drank from it and they didn’t care too much about whether or not they urinated or defecated while they did so. It was one of the most important lessons Jim had drummed into them during their short training sessions back at the safe house.

But it was a lesson Carter knew they had to observe.

He had seen too many soldiers stricken with stomach bugs after they had ignored similar warnings in Algeria and Egypt. The vomiting and diarrhoea left them even more dehydrated than before they had given into the urge to drink the tainted water. Without modern medicines they might not have survived and Carter had none of those to hand. What little they had carried, had been taken by the CTs when they were captured.

“Fill your water bottles.” Carter hissed into Prof’s ear, leaving him to pass the message back along the line. “But don’t drink. We’ll find somewhere to lay up and boil the water.”

It might lose them another day, but they daren’t risk moving on while they were so thirsty. They were too dehydrated to risk continuing. If just one of them collapsed they’d be slowed down by the burden of carrying him. And if a search was being mounted, it would allow their pursuers to catch up with them.

The theft of the two vehicles might slow the CTs down, but it wouldn’t stop them and they had now been on the road for two nights and a day. Once the pursuers found the vehicles, as Carter was certain they would, they would know which direction to follow just from using the signs on the ground and in the broken stems of vegetation. They didn’t have to be as good at tracking as Han to follow such a clear trail in daylight.

Carter had tried to convince himself that they wouldn’t be followed, but it was a faint hope. Chin Peng was too valuable to the Communists to allow him to be spirited across the border into Malaya. His capture would demoralise the CTs still fighting there and the propaganda value of such a prize couldn’t be underestimated. Warriner had made that clear at their briefings.

No, the CTs were sure to follow and, by making just a simple telephone call, may already have directed CTs in northern Malaya to patrol the most likely crossing points and set up ambushes along the border. Carter’s sabotaging of their telephone may have disrupted communications, but it wouldn’t have halted them completely. There would be another phone somewhere, even in rural Thailand.

Carter crossed the small stream and led the party further off the track until he was deep enough into the undergrowth to risk lighting a fire. Finding an area bereft of vegetation beneath a part fallen tree, he let the men stop. They quickly gathered kindling and managed to get a small fire going, using matches found in Jim’s pockets. For once Carter was glad to be in the company of a smoker.

Han realised what they were about to do and tried to stop Carter, but he brushed away his protesting hands.

“We have to boil the water.” He tried to explain.

Surprisingly, Jim interpreted the words. He was thirsty too, Carter realised. He was just acting out of self-interest.

Han threw up his hands in horrified surrender, then went off to sit on the other side of the clearing, his gesture making it clear that he was distancing himself from them both literally and metaphorically.

They balanced a water bottle on stones, above the flames, the stopper removed so that it wouldn’t explode under the pressure of the steam that would be produced. It took about ten minutes for the water to come to the boil, then a further five minutes until Carter decided that the heat would have killed any germs. It was what the training manuals recommended.

He took the first bottle off the fire, standing it in a shallow part of the stream to cool, and replaced it with their only other one. Water purification tablets would have been quicker, but those, like their medicines, had been taken from them.

Once it had cooled enough, the water bottle was passed around so that each could take a drink of the tepid water. Its temperature meant that it wasn't refreshing, but their bodies only demanded the life-giving liquid, they didn't require it to be ice cool as well.

The prisoners had their gags removed and water was poured between their lips in small quantities. Carter had no intention of letting their hands loose as well. With both hands and feet free, they might risk making a dash for it and in a chase through close jungle there was a risk of one or both of their prizes slipping away. Carter wasn't too worried about Jim, he was always just a bonus, but after them having gone through so much, he wasn't going to risk losing Chin Peng when they were so close to safety.

When the bottles had been emptied, Danny Glass returned to the stream to re-fill them and they went through the sterilisation process once more. Once the bottles were cool enough to be carried, Carter led them back across the stream towards the broader footpath.

They had almost reached it when Han stopped, his body rigid with concentration as he strained all his senses to confirm what he thought he had heard. Carter could hear nothing except the jungle sounds around them, blotting out any other noises.

Han held his position for several seconds then Carter, too, heard the sound. Voices, speaking quite softly. They could be no further than a few yards distant. The sound was coming from the right, the direction that their own party had been coming from before Han had diverted them towards the stream.

It was a search party, it had to be.

Carter signalled for them to take whatever cover they could, before lowering himself to the ground and aiming his Sten gun towards the small gap in the vegetation where they had left the path.

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The fact that they were static suggested some sort of debate was taking place; one voice making suggestions while the others countered the argument or put forward their own ideas. Which suggested that the commandos had left some sort of sign on the path that had been spotted by the pursuers and now they were considering its meaning.

Carter strained his eyes towards the small opening in the vegetation. Strands of sword grass reached out from either side, threatening to snag on anything, or anyone, that passed it by.

There! He spotted it. A filament of thread, so thin that it wasn't possible to determine its colour because it picked up so little light. Just a snagged bit of cotton from one of their trouser legs, but their death warrant if the CTs investigated further.

For CTs whose survival depended on picking out the slightest threat, it might as well have been a neon sign.

But did it mean that Carter's party had merely passed this spot? Or did it mean they had turned into the narrow gap?

Carter sniffed. The air was filled with the smell of rotten vegetation, the background smell of the jungle. But mixed in with it, could he detect the sweat from their unwashed bodies? They must be putting out quite a stink by now. But it was a natural smell, not the fragrance of soap that easily gave away the presence of humans, and westerners in particular.

Or perhaps a whiff of woodsmoke still lingered in the air.

But was the smell distinctive enough for the CTs to detect?

A foot moved, then another. Someone was approaching the gap, no doubt to take a closer look. It was then that Carter spotted the sign that would really give away their presence. Pressed into the mud, a few feet into the gap from the path, was the perfect imprint of a British army issue boot.

Whoever looked into the gap couldn't fail to see it and, a few yards further away, the prone body of Carter himself.

There was no option; they would have to fight.

A sandalled foot appeared in the gap, then arms as the foot's owner bent over to push some of the vegetation aside.

As a face appeared, Carter squeezed the trigger of his Sten gun and released a short burst of fire.

The face and limbs disappeared as a shrill shriek of pain announced that Carter's fire had found its target. The response was immediate and rifles cracked and Sten guns barked in reply, fired blind through the undergrowth.

The bullets passed harmlessly above their heads but it wouldn't take long for whoever was in charge to order that their aim should be lowered. But unless the CTs braved the gap, there was no way through the thick vegetation to get a clearer shot.

Well, no way that Carter could see but that didn't mean the CTs couldn't find away around behind them if they were prepared to have their skin ravaged by thorns and sword grass. How much pain would they endure to try to rescue their leader?

Or how much would whoever led the CTs be prepared to put the attackers through? Whoever rescued Chin Peng could expect to be rewarded handsomely. That might be enough of an incentive to endure a considerable amount of pain.

Carter's men watched the leaves and branches and fired towards any indication of a passing bullet. But it was a stalemate. The CTs daren't force their way through the gap and Carter's men had nowhere to go except back towards the stream where they had taken their break. If they retreated, it would allow the CTs to move forward and continue their hunt. Victory would depend on which side was able to keep the most men alive, because now they had been found, Carter doubted if the CTs would allow them to get away again. At least, not until they had reclaimed Chin Peng.

Carter worked his way through the options that he was able to identify.

The most obvious was to execute Chin Peng, but that wouldn't mean that the CTs would give up their chase. In fact it might motivate them even more, to take revenge on the executioners.

He could continue to fight it out and hope that the superior discipline and weapons skills of the former commandos would see them victorious. But that was a high risk tactic. If the CTs had enough ammunition they could keep them pinned down for days, until the commandos ran out of bullets and were overpowered. That wouldn't take long, he knew.

They had only captured the ammunition that had been in the possession of the guards and what little had been inside the bungalow. The CTs, on the other hand, would have made sure they had as much ammo as they could carry.

Finally, they could negotiate, using the only bargaining chip at their disposal. They could agree to hand over Chin Peng in exchange for their own safe passage across the border. It seemed like the only viable option.

Carter fired another lengthy burst of rounds towards the sound of commands being shouted and was gratified to hear sandalled feet slapping on the ground as the CTs withdrew a few yards. He then rolled sideways and pushed himself backwards to change his position. Bullets snickered through the vegetation and ripped up the jungle floor almost exactly where he had been. While some of the CTs had withdrawn one, at least, had kept his nerve and waited for Carter to giveaway his position.

More bullets came from the path as the CTs tried to use the weight of their firepower to move forward once again. The commandos replied, firing short, controlled bursts in order to maintain their aim, at the same time conserving their dwindling stocks of ammunition.. Changes in light and shadow, seen through the vegetation, indicated where the CTs were, but they were such a poor indication that Carter doubted that any of the bullets had found their mark.

Carter fired another burst and then the hammer of his weapon clicked harmlessly against the back of the firing pin to indicate that the chamber was empty of rounds. Hurriedly he released the magazine and let it drop to the jungle floor as he pulled a fresh one from his trouser pocket and slotted it into place. Pulling back on the cocking handle, he fired again, just a three round burst.

His pockets were empty now. If the magazine he had just fitted was full, he now had just thirty rounds remaining. He doubted that his three comrades had any more than that.

“Who’s nearest Chin Peng?” Carter called.

“Me, I think?” Danny Glass replied. He had been at the rear of the file with Chin Peng and Jim in front of him as they had returned towards the path. But when they went to ground, Glass would have wriggled forward to get into the best position to defend himself.

“OK. Bring him forward to me. I need him to interpret for me.”

### **End of Extract**

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