

Borneo to be wild

Scorpions, leeches, snakes and crocodiles... Why did these women venture into the jungle without Tarzan? Jane Dimond has the answer

LAST summer, while many of us were happily lying on a sun-soaked beach sipping a long cool drink, 12 ordinary women from middle England chose to put themselves through physical and mental torture on a month-long, life-threatening expedition to a jungle so challenging that only the SAS had been there before.

Channel 4 expected casualties. When 24 officers from the British Army had gone into the same Borneo jungle only months earlier, 10 had to be airlifted out. Indeed, British soldiers serving in the Malaysian territory of Brunei, part of the island of Borneo, had run a sweep on how many women would survive.

Documentary director Paul Berriff was anticipating crocodile or snake attacks. On the training weekend in Wales he told me of the probability of 'serious casualties, possibly death'. Many of the women had written letters to their children and loved ones if they did not return.

But against the odds, all the women came back alive – and the resulting documentary, which promises to be one of the most intriguing fly-on-the-wall series this winter, is as much about the

extraordinary indefatigability of the human spirit as the drama of survival.

TVTimes was invited out to Borneo to meet the group as they emerged from the darkness of the jungle. There was sheer incredulity at their achievement. Ken Harnes, the former Army officer who led the women on the expedition, seemed shell-shocked. 'The Borneo jungle, with its oppressive climate, is the ultimate discomfort zone and many soldiers simply can't hack it. I'm astonished. I fully expected two or three women to go.'

So was the expedition easier than those Ken runs for soldiers? 'Absolutely not, it was every bit as physically demanding.'

her husband was on the phone having a highbrow chat with an admiral when all of a sudden these tampons floated past the window – their son has a tendency to tie them to handkerchiefs and use them for parachuting.

'It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I don't want to let it slip and stagnate' says 42-year-old actress and farmer's wife Alex James. 'It was a sentiment expressed across the group, the feeling that perhaps this was their one big chance to do something 'rather extraordinary'. Women are

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says the man who organised the expedition with his wife Cwenda after she casually remarked that it was unfair he always got to do such exciting things. 'The soldiers are under a unique pressure in that they have to move tactically through the jungle, but they're also trained – so the women were severely disadvantaged in that respect.

'Dehydration, heat exhaustion, scorpions and leeches, bites and cuts [which are difficult to heal because of the humidity] are the major dangers in a jungle. And then there's the snakes and crocodiles of course.'

Of course... So why did they do it? 'Why not?' is the reply that came back loud and clear from Dicky Sewell, a Herefordshire school matron and retired naval officer who, with her eccentric nature and laudatorial sense of humour, turned out to be the joker of the pack. For example, when she memorably told of the occasion

a stubborn breed, of course, and the desire to prove others wrong was also a strong motivating factor, before and during the expedition. Dicky's husband thought: 'an entirely inappropriate thing for girls to be doing' – words that spurred her on in the last few days when the minimum 45lb backpack (if it was your turn to carry the water bladders, it was 55lb) and low food intake proved too much for her slim frame and high metabolic rate and left her light-headed, legs shaking violently and on the verge of collapse. 'I was determined not to give in and give him the satisfaction.'

Talking to the women, exclusively, after their grueling ordeal, there were tales of tears and frustration, of sheer physical exhaustion and of slipped hormone replacement patches – but miraculously none of their worst fears actually materialised. Just a few mosquito bites,



It ain't half hot mum. The James 'chill out' (main pic) before it's back to work for Cwenda Harnes and Wendy Stubbs (above). Brunnie hairdresser Julie Hallam fires supper (centre), while Fiona Shapcott and Issy Howell take a break (bottom)

some leeches here and there, one twisted ankle, a scorpion on Dicky's scarf and a rather hair-raising experience for Alex when she spotted a snake on her boot.

The jungle bunny most likely to capture the public imagination is Posh Spice look-alike Fiona Shapcott, 32, with a healthy physique and predilection for wearing low-cut vests – or nothing at all when she spied in front of the camera.

'I needed to wash. Clothes off. Needed to pee, I did. It's as simple as that – and if people have a problem with it they can turn it off', she says matter-of-factly.

Her physical strength is also likely to impress compared to someone like Alex who nearly had to be airlifted out of the

jungle as she fought an heroic struggle against heat exhaustion.

'I don't want to sound like super-woman,' says Fiona. 'I found it easier than some and did the pacing and macheting at the front – but we needed people like Alex just as much as she needed us. She never lost her sense of humour and everyone gave the group different strengths. We stuck together and, by God, we looked out for each other's backs.'

'Soldiers are more selfish. These women carried extra weights on their packs for those who were struggling,' says Ken. 'And therein, perhaps, lies the secret of why 12 ordinary women from middle England took on an SAS-style challenge – and made it through.'

'I was determined not to give in,' says school matron and former naval officer Dicky Sewell (right)

