

Travel Tales

The Search for Jim Thompson: Causes, Witnesses, the Way Forward, and A Murder

Part 4

by

Lew Toulmin

Last month we learned that my calculations on the “probability of detection” and “probability of area” for the famous 1967 Jim Thompson (JT) search in Malaysia meant that it was quite possible that the searchers missed the body of the “Silk King of Thailand” in the jungle. This month we will discuss the possible causes of the disappearance, the potential eyewitnesses, a way to move the case forward, and the murder of Jim’s sister.

I was able to identify 25 possible causes for JT’s disappearance, and eliminate 11 of them, mostly silly items mentioned in the press. These included “quicksand,” “caves,” “boreholes,” “leopards” and “snapping traps or punji stake traps used by natives” – there are none of these in the Cameron Highlands. Other causes could be reasonably eliminated on statistical grounds, such as tiger attack: there are a very few tigers in the area, but not a single reported attack in the last century. In terms of intentional murder, JT’s ex-wife was incapacitated on her death bed in the US and is not a viable suspect. The main beneficiary of JT’s will was his nephew who was in New York when JT disappeared, and who preserved JT’s Thai assets (mainly his famous house museum) as a foundation, and thus is not a viable suspect.

One writer has pushed the theory that JT was murdered by business rivals, including the wife of a former Prime Minister of Thailand. But it seems unlikely that an assassin hired in Bangkok could travel to the isolated Cameron Highlands, where every stranger was noted, and could strike JT at just the right moment when he left for an unscheduled walk from a remote bungalow atop a steep hill, then successfully dispose of the body.

Another author claims that JT left the Cameron Highlands (leaving behind his wallet, vital medicines, passport, driving license, business and all his fortune), started a new life somewhere else, and was spotted in Tahiti some months after the disappearance. But it seems unlikely that

JT, who was famous all over the world, was only spotted once after disappearing, and could have set up a desirable life elsewhere, having left all assets behind.

Other writers pose even more unlikely scenarios: JT was killed by the CIA because he didn't like the war in Vietnam; he was kidnapped by Communists for ransom (but no ransom note was forthcoming); he committed suicide (but he had business appointments the next day and lived a very glamorous and prosperous lifestyle); or he was hit by a truck and the driver took the body miles to the north, over rough roads, and buried the body.

All in all, the most credible explanation seems the simplest: JT walked into a very dangerous, confusing, unfamiliar jungle area with no canteen, machete, survival equipment, map, money, buddy or notice to friends of his intended route. He was known to hike off trail, he "enjoyed rough terrain" and he actually "liked getting lost" -- and had in fact gotten lost in the jungle for a few hours the day before the disappearance.

I think the probability -- but not certainty -- is that he paid for these many mistakes with his life.



Lew Toulmin at the "Jim Thompson stone," where Jim may have been seen by a witness.

After JT departed the Moonlight Bungalow around 2:30 pm on Easter Sunday afternoon, March 26, there were nine persons who claimed to have heard or seen JT in the area. I was able to do geo-location of these witnesses, and eliminate two of them as being too far from JT to have made a credible sighting -- one was almost 200 yards away and one about 254 yards. The remaining eyewitnesses were generally not very credible for various reasons. However, one female servant stated that she was walking to work when she saw JT "sitting on a large stone smoking a cigarette and looking tired." Since she was close to JT and reported some believable detail, she seems to be more credible. And a cook, "Fatima," stated that she saw JT from just a few yards away, outside a bungalow 200 yards south of the Moonlight Bungalow.

I feel that a possible way forward in this mystery would be to use standard, modern search and rescue (SAR) approaches, namely scenario development, Mattson voting, and cadaver dogs. SAR has improved dramatically since 1967, with much more understanding and massive statistical databases on lost person behavior. These can be used to

develop likely scenarios, divide the search area into segments, brief SAR experts on the possibilities, and then have the experts do secret balloting (Mattson voting) on which segments are the highest and lowest priorities for expending SAR resources.

In this case the preferred SAR resource would be cadaver dogs (also called “human remains detection dogs”). Such highly trained dogs, unavailable in 1967, have amazing powers to detect buried bodies hundreds of years old, tiny shards of human bones, and even bodies that are under water. The challenges here would be coming up with reasonable scenarios that limit the dogs’ search areas to a manageable size, and securing enough trained dogs.

There is one last tragic wrinkle in the Thompson case. On August 30, 1967, just five months after the JT disappearance, JT’s older sister Katharine Thompson Wood was brutally murdered in her mansion on the Pennsylvania/Delaware border. There were no signs of forced entry, nothing was missing, she was not molested, and her two large watchdogs apparently did nothing to stop the attack. According to the Pennsylvania State Police cold case officer, the crime is still unsolved. Newspapers at the time tried to link this murder with the JT disappearance, but no evidence has ever emerged. A person of interest in the case was Katharine’s son, who committed suicide four years later, but no convincing proof was ever found against him.

While the Pennsylvania case is probably unsolvable, I think the Jim Thompson disappearance in Malaysia could possibly be solved using modern SAR methods. The 50th anniversary of the case is rapidly approaching. If no steps are taken -- beyond a lot of repetitive press stories in 2017 rehashing the case -- then the probability of solving the most famous disappearance case on land in Asia is quite certain: zero.

Lew Toulmin lives in Silver Spring. His massive report on the Jim Thompson disappearance can be downloaded free from his website at: www.themosttraveled.com/new/new_land.html.

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#end of this JT story and end of JT series of stories#