

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 6

A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails

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By Ron Thomson

**The best of fair-chase/free-range big game hunting stories from colonial
Africa (Southern Rhodesia)
(1955 - 1980)**

A great hippo hunting saga

I have never considered hunting hippos to be a very salubrious occupation. But, then, I have never shot hippos (or any other wild animal) for 'sport'. Nevertheless, I have enjoyed every hunt I ever conducted and big game hunting has, throughout my life, been my all-absorbing passion. My various and voluminous hunting adventures were all carried out, however, in my official capacity as a government game ranger in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and there was a management purpose for every animal that I killed.

I have shot a great many hippos during my long game ranging career: probably 30 individual crop-raiders; several in Lake Kariba because they were repeatedly destroying fishing gillnets in a part of the lake that had been designated a commercial fishing ground; four attacking hippos in protection of my staff - at very close range (a matter of feet rather than yards) - when we were catching them; 30 at Chipinda Pools, Gonarezhou National Park, which I shot, one or two per week, over a series of months, for staff rations; and 270 on a major culling programme in the lower Lundi River - also in the Gonarezhou. The last two groups - 30 and 270 - comprised my culling quota of 300 for the year 1973.

In addition, I captured and moved (for restocking purposes) to various national parks, 30 hippos from a mud-puddle of a pool in the Sabi River late in 1973. Never before, and never since, has such a hippo capture operation ever been conducted in Rhodesia. And I captured another single, small hippo at Chipinda Pools - in an experimental boma (corral) - just prior to the main capture operation on the Sabi.

You might say, therefore, that I was - *inter alia* - steeped in hunting, culling and capture work with hippos throughout my 24 years of service with the Rhodesian Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (1959 - 1983); but not nearly as much as I was involved with hunting elephants and buffaloes, or capturing black rhinos.

The most memorable hippo hunt I ever conducted took place towards the end of the dry season in 1973. On that occasion I darted (and so captured) a single young but mature hippo bull (a problem animal) in Kyle National

Park; and I moved it to a large dam in Mushandike National Park. This was an epic capture-hunt the likes of which is unlikely to ever happen again. This extraordinary story is recounted in the last pages of this mini-book, but three previous hippo hunting adventures - which spanned a period of 18 years - have to be told first. Without the pertinent experience I gained during these earlier hunts, this final one would never have taken place!

For those of you who believe that hippo hunting offers little excitement - gird your loins! And take deep breaths NOW because when you are standing alongside me on that final hunt, you will not be able to breathe.

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The hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibious*), in terms of its mass alone, is the third largest land mammal on earth. Only the elephant and the white rhinoceros are heavier. Bulls stand four feet six inches (1,5 meters.) tall at the shoulder; their barrel-shaped bodies attain a length - muzzle to tail - of over 11 feet (3.7 meters); and they weigh in excess of 3300 lbs (over 2000 kg).

They are armed with tusk-like canines and incisor teeth. The canines - two on the bottom jaw and two on the top jaw - continuously grind against each other leaving both sets of teeth with broad flat, angular surfaces, the points and outer edges of which are razor sharp. The curved bottom canines are the longest some reaching exposed lengths in excess of 12 inches (30 cms). These 'tushes' (as they are more correctly called) are as thick as a man's forearm.

Hippos on land appear ungainly, but they are more agile than you might think; and they can run surprisingly fast despite their great bulk. The females, particularly, are very aggressive when they have calves. So, all hippos should be treated with great respect.

I have removed the bodies of several people from the Lundi and Sabi Rivers (in and around the Gonarezhou National Park) which had been virtually cut in two by a hippo's slashing tushes - the extraordinarily sharp canines having easily cut right through the body and the spine of a grown man, in a single mauling. Few people see such bodies, however, because the local crocodiles take away and devour the spoils.

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Kazungula 1955.

Kazungula is located in the extreme eastern corner of what, in 1955, was Southern Rhodesia. It is on the banks of the Zambezi River - about 50 miles (70 kms) upstream of Victoria Falls - where Southern Rhodesia, the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and South West Africa (now Namibia) meet.

In 1955 there was nothing much at Kazungula except a border post to facilitate the passage of travellers between Rhodesia and Bechuanaland.

There was also an experimental rice farm at Kazungula, which was managed by an old bachelor friend of my parents, Bob Wilson. My parents, who were farming at Karoi in the northern part of Southern Rhodesia at that time, took me, and my two young brothers, on a visit to Bob Wilson that year - which is why I was there for this adventure. I was 15 years old.

In those days, Kazungula was a very wild and exciting place for a young lad like me to visit. The whole region was full of elephants and lions so I persuaded my parents to let me take my Martini-Henry .577/450 rifle. I had purchased it from a small gun shop in the village of Plumtree (60 miles south of Bulawayo) where I attended boarding school. When I first saw that old weapon on the shop's gun racks, I fell in love with it. I just had to have it. So I had begun saving my pennies.

This gives some measure of the pioneering state of the country in those days

- when a fifteen year old schoolboy, without parental supervision, was able to legally purchase such a big game hunting weapon.

Bob was having trouble with a hippo that was raiding his rice paddies at night. Consequently, he instructed his assistant farm manager - a huge one-legged man called Tony van Jaarsveldt - to go out and kill it. Tony had received that command on the day of our arrival. It did not take me long to inveigle my way into Tony's confidence - a matter made much easier because I had my Martini-Henry rifle with me. My new found friend planned to shoot the hippo that night with the aid of a powerful spotlight, and he invited me

along for the ride.

I will never forget that night. After supper we drove out from the farm buildings in Tony's old Chevrolet pick-up. His left leg had been amputated at the knee, so - to enable him to activate the clutch - he had invented and constructed a metal rod contraption that he fastened to the stump. His driving was flawless.

Sitting inside the pick-up's cab, Tony and I waited for the hippo to arrive. We were parked on the edge of a large paddy field which was covered in foot-tall green rice plants. The field was awash with shallow water pumped out of the nearby Zambezi River. The wind blew gently and warmly into our faces - bringing to us the scents and sounds of the great river. There was the distant rumble of water running over rapids and, periodically, we heard the contented grunts of hippos wallowing in the big river pools.

No moon shone that night but the starlight was bright. There was an incessant cacophony of gentle sounds coming from the paddy. It was the hum of bustling movement and squabbling from the masses of wild ducks and other water birds that were fossicking about, feeding amongst the rice.

It was crop-raiding by wild ducks, rather than by hippos, that eventually put paid to the rice growing experiment. I had never in my life seen so many wild ducks in one place. Huge flocks had blacked out the setting sun when they had come swarming in to the paddy fields earlier in the evening.

At about 9 o'clock we heard the methodical splashes of a hippo's feet as it waded through the shallow water towards us. It took its time, stopping often to listen! Waiting - to listen some more! Plodding on! Tony had chosen his ambush spot well.

The vehicle was positioned on a small rise just opposite that part of the paddy field where the hippo was wont to stand and eat the young rice plants. Tony had connected the leads of a powerful spotlight to the vehicle's battery terminals. It was all set to light up the night at the right moment. He had my Martini-Henry loaded up and ready to fire; and I sat next to him holding his Mannlicher-Schoenauer 9.5.mm.

My new found friend gave me permission to shoot at the hippo, too - AFTER he had fired the first shot. His philosophy was that if he did not kill the hippo

with the first shot it would not matter if I wounded it a second or third time. And there was a chance that I might just place a bullet into a vital organ that would kill it!

The possibility of shooting this hippo roused my blood. It filled me with a strange excitement that flooded my whole being. I tangibly felt the increased blood pressure pounding through my veins; and thumping in my ears.

The hippo walked right through the paddy field and it emerged onto the dry land just below the vehicle, on our left hand side (my side of the vehicle). It then started walking past us at what I guessed was no more than 100 yards range. We could not see it but we could clearly hear it *crop-crop-cropping* on the short-grazed wild grasses as it moved along.

Tony stepped out of the vehicle, on the far side, with my rifle in his hands. The noise he made opening the door was not great but it was enough to stop the hippo grazing. At least - for a few short moments after he had exited the vehicle - I noticed that all grazing sounds had ceased.

Tony van Jaarsveldt lay over the pick-up's bonnet and made ready to fire. Then, with both the forepart of the rifle *and* the handle of the spotlight held firmly in his huge left fist, he pressed the switch. The bright beam lit up the whole countryside.

The light was focussed on the place where we had heard the hippo grazing. Tony cast the beam about - searching. The standing trees were few but there were many others that had been pushed over by elephants. The grass, however, was relatively short; and there were only a few green bushes scattered about.

A small grey duiker flashed its bright eyes at us before dashing off into some distant cover. That was all we saw. There was no hippo anywhere.

"I'll be damned," Tony exclaimed under his breath. He cast the beam about, covering a much wider area - searching.

Then, to me, he directed the question: *"Did you hear it run away, Ron?"*

"No!" I said emphatically. *"It didn't run away. I would have heard it!"*

"Then where the hell did it go?" Tony asked nobody in particular. Still he

searched. The light probed everywhere. Nothing!

“Ron,” he said to me quietly. “See if you can find a rock or something to chuck into that bit of thick bush over there”. He identified the target area by wiggling the light beam over a clump of bushes some 50 yards away. I walked into the light, moving away from the vehicle towards the bushes he had indicated, searching the ground for something to throw.

“Don’t get too close,” Tony warned.

I found a small but heavy piece of driftwood. I hurled it high into the air and it fell, fair and square, right into the middle of the target area. Nothing happened.

“What the hell,” I heard Tony muttering to himself again. Then louder, speaking to me, he said: *“It couldn’t have just vanished into thin air.”*

But *that*, it seemed, was exactly what the hippo had done.

Our movements were restricted by two factors. Tony, with just one good leg - and who used crutches most of the time - couldn’t wander through this broken bush country with a rifle in his hands. Secondly, we couldn’t take the spotlight with us because it was connected to the vehicle battery!

For half an hour we drove around amongst the rocks, the bushes and the fallen tree trunks, looking for that hippo. We flashed the bright light about everywhere. The terrain was rough but we searched all around the area where we had last heard the hippo, and we found no trace of it.

Reluctantly - bewildered - we gave up the quest and returned to the track that led us back towards the distant farm homestead.

I was disappointed but thrilled at the same time. This had been my very first big game hunting experience. We had had to turn for home empty-handed and under very strange circumstances, but the hippo hunt that night had been an experience I would not have missed for anything. It was also one that I never forgot.

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The night, however, was not yet over. There was a consolation prize still to come!

Driving back, we passed through the native labourers' compound. This comprised a widely scattered group of pole-and-dagga (pole and mud-walled) thatched huts around which was an expansive area of maize and vegetable plantings - the workers' personal gardens! Here they grew the food they ate: mainly maize (mealies), sorghum, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and bananas.

"A lone elephant bull has been raiding the gardens here," Tony told me as we entered the first part of the mealie-lands. *"So keep your eyes and ears open. If we see him we will shoot him."*

This was a bonus. Once again the adrenaline started to flow. Once again I could feel hot blood pumping through my veins.

I leant out of the open window on my side of the vehicle; and I strained my ears. But the noise of the pick-up's old diesel engine drowned out every sound.

Tony's senses were better attuned than mine. He knew what sounds to listen for - the noises that an elephant makes when it is raiding a cropland at night. He also knew *where* to look.

He suddenly switched off the vehicle headlights and we cruised to a stop on a slight rise. He killed the engine and applied the hand brake.

Silence reigned. We both listened intently. Heavy rustling sounds came to me from our immediate left-front. It sounded like something very big walking through the mealies.

Tony heard it too. From his driving seat inside the vehicle, he held the spotlight in his right hand and lifted it out of the window and above the cab's roof; and he flicked on the switch.

The powerful light lit up the whole area. To the left of the road, standing belly deep amongst the mealies, a huge elephant bull was caught squarely in the beam. It was no more than thirty paces away. We had caught it red-handed.

It was on my side of the cab almost within touching distance. This was the very first elephant I had ever seen and its great size amazed me. I had had no idea they were so big.

My heart began hammering in my breast. We were so close to it, so very close. The animal was truly huge but I had little time to marvel at the spectacle. No sooner did we have the elephant in the spotlight than it began to slide ever more quickly through the maize crop - to our left - towards the thick thorn brush beyond.

Tony quickly pulled the spotlight back into the cab. It was still burning bright and nearly blinded me. He pushed the beam through the open window on my side of the cab.

"Take it," he told me abruptly, and he thrust the torch into my hands.

"Keep him in the beam," Tony instructed me peremptorily. I held the spotlight at arm's length outside the window, and did as Tony had told me.

The elephant was lumbering obliquely away from us and I held the spot squarely on its body - just behind the shoulder. I had shot a lot of game animals at that stage in my life - kudu, sable and smaller antelopes - and I knew exactly where the heart and lungs are located.

The big elephant bull was now moving fast. It held its head high - cast steadily to one side; to its left. Even in its flight, it was watching us, with one eye, intently.

Alongside me I heard Tony slipping one of the heavy brass cartridges into the Martini's breech. The lever clicked shut. The big man then leaned against me, squashing me into the cab's doorpost; and he pushed the barrel of the weapon through my open window. I leaned back as far as I was able - to give him more room - and I still contrived to keep the spot focussed on the now running elephant.

It seemed he had had no time to aim the weapon before he pulled the trigger.

"BaDOOOOF". Despite his large size, Tony was kicked back viciously to his own side of the cab. There was a big cloud of blue-white smoke outside the window on my side of the cab. It hung like a shroud in the almost still air - reducing our visibility to zero.

Out in the dark night I heard the heavy lead bullet thump into the elephant's body.

I continued to direct the beam towards where I had last seen the elephant. I could see nothing.

The smoke told me that the cartridge had been loaded with old propellant powders. It also told me the gun shop owner had sold me very old cartridges.

Nevertheless, the one Tony had used had 'worked'.

My ears rang from the detonation. For several long minutes the big bang seriously impaired my hearing. I experienced a moment of panic not knowing what the elephant was doing out there behind the smokescreen. My fear was enhanced by the fact that I could not hear it either.

Tony was unperturbed. He took the spotlight out of my hands and climbed out of his (right) side of the vehicle; and he shone the light over the top of the cab. A very soft breeze blew up and shifted the smoke to the rear of the pick-up. So we were soon able to see over the cropland again.

The elephant had gone.

In the distance, despite the ringing in my ears, I now heard the elephant crashing through the thick thorn brush as it made good its escape. I felt despondent. I believed we had wounded our quarry and I did not like that idea at all!

Early the next morning, with one of Tony's farm labourers acting as a tracker, we followed the spoor out of the mealiland. Tony walked - with the help of two forearm crutches. I was amazed at how well he managed through some of the very thick thorn brush that we traversed. He carried his Mannlicher slung over one shoulder with a leather strap. I carried my Martini Henry with both hands

This was my first experience of tracking. I was surprised at how easily the native man followed the often very faint footprints left by the wounded elephant. It was only years later that I came to understand that it was not *just* footprints he was following. He was actually following a whole host of different '*signs*' that the elephant had left behind in its flight.

We had not gone very far before the tracker started pointing out flecks of

dried but obviously still frothy lung blood. Soon it was splattered all over the ground and it clung to the leaves of the trees and bushes that we passed. The bullet had found its mark!

It was not long before we were following a path of frothy blood, rather than the, by now, indistinct shuffling marks left by the elephants dragging feet.

“He has not gone very far,” Tony told me after a while. *“He can’t go far with this kind of blood on the spoor.”* Even so, we followed the tracks for another mile before we came across the elephant’s carcass.

The blood trail got heavier and heavier as we travelled along. There were unbelievable amounts of blood splattered in a wide arc around the carcass. The stricken animal had clearly come to a sudden stop, drowning in its own blood. Blood had gushed out of its trunk in gallons before the poor beast expired. I was amazed and horrified all at the same time. I hadn’t realised that one elephant could spew out so much gore.

When we found it, the elephant was lying on its side. Its uppermost tusk had been long ago broken off halfway along its length. The bottom tusk was intact.

That experience ended my short sojourn at Kazungula. After we had found the dead elephant, I left Tony at the scene and returned, with a labourer, to the farmhouse - because, late that same morning, I had no option but to accompany my family as we began the long 600 mile journey back to our family farm at Karoi. I was reluctant to go because I was really in my element in the company of my new found friend and soul mate, Tony van Jaarsveldt.

Tony wrote to me in the weeks ahead and told me that the tusks had weighed 31 and 45 pounds respectively.

There was a potential problem, however, with regard to where the elephant had fallen. It had been legitimately shot in Southern Rhodesia as a crop-raider, but it had died just across the unmarked border inside Bechuanaland. That fact, however, did not daunt Tony. He hitched up the farm’s bulldozer and dragged the carcass back into Rhodesia. There it was cut up and the meat distributed amongst the farm’s native labour force.

The Sebungwe Narrows

In January 1964 I was promoted to Senior Game Ranger and transferred from Main Camp, Hwange National Park, to Binga, which was in the middle Zambezi Valley. Binga (village), in those days, was a typical old-style colonial government outpost where a District Commissioner (D.C.) ruled the roost. As it turned out, I actually got on very well with the D.C. - a senior government official called Ian Findlay.

I was given command of the national parks station and lived in the Binga village. I had the responsibility of administering all the department's affairs throughout the 5 000 sq. mile Binga district. Not only was I the *senior* game ranger at Binga, in those days, I was the *only* game ranger there.

The district encompassed a vast area of pristine middle Zambezi Valley bush that stretched back varying distances - up to 50 miles (as the crow flies) south from the Lake Kariba shoreline. The Binga sector of the southern shoreline comprised the entire upstream half of the lake's 174 mile (280 kms) length.

Lake Kariba filled to capacity for the first time in 1963 and it displaced 57 000 primitive Batonka people - 14 000 of which were resettled in the hinterland of the Binga district. Hundreds of thousands of wild animals were also forced to vacate the flooded lake basin and these animals, too, moved into the same hinterland areas. In 1964, therefore, huge conflicts were a constant between the Batonka people and these wild animals. Elephants and buffaloes raided the people's crops nightly; lions, leopards and hyenas, killed and ate the people's sheep and goats (and sometimes the people, too); and it was my job to attend to all these conflict situations.

The Batonka did not have cattle because the district was infested with tsetse fly, which infect cattle with nagana - a disease that is fatal to them.

One day I was asked by the D.C. to attend to a hippo crop-raiding complaint near the Sebungwe Narrows - which is located in the extreme upper reaches of the lake. A single hippo had taken to walking out of the lake at dusk and making its way into maize lands that surrounded the villages on some nearby high ground, returning to the water by dawn. And it spent the whole night -

every night - eating maize plants in the people's croplands. It used the same path every night.

I made plans to tackle this problem on the night of the next full moon.

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My Bushman tracker Ben, and I, arrived at the complainant's village after lunch and set up camp not far from nearby Tobwe Bay - not too close to the water's edge because mosquitoes, at night, were purgatory anywhere and everywhere along the lake shore.

The complainant was delighted that I had come to attend to his problem. He offered me 100 percent cooperation and assistance.

After he had shown me the hippo's tracks in his lands, and after he had pointed out to me the extent of the damage done, I retired to Tobwe Bay where I spent the afternoon fishing for the famous Kariba Bream - and that evening, Ben and I engorged ourselves on fresh fried fish.

The hippo had decimated the man's maize crop and it had trampled a very healthy crop of dagga (marijuana) that was growing amongst the mealies. Because smoking marijuana was a traditional Batonka custom, they were the only tribe in the whole country who were legally allowed to grow it.

With regards to the crop-raiding hippo, the complainant had a legitimate grievance.

That evening, I drove my Land Rover to within half a mile of the village - and walked the rest of the way to the complainant's huts. I did not want the arrival of a vehicle after dark to chase the hippo away!

Ben and I each carried a camp chair, and we had settled down around the village camp fire, with the complainant, by eight o'clock. The hippo had then not yet arrived.

The headman sat opposite Ben and I on a short wooden Batonka stool. We spoke about a million different things in hushed whispery voices. He told us, for example, that when the hippo arrived his family members normally threw stones at it in an attempt to drive it away. That night, however, he had told his people NOT to throw stones because I was going to shoot it.

The hippo arrived sometime after 11 o'clock. I suspect it had been eating in some other village garden earlier in the evening. We all heard it munching away and pushing through the mealie plants. It was taking its time and enjoying its meal.

We stoked up the fire and I gave my ash bag a vigorous shake. In the light of the flames, the puff of ash-dust told me that the stiff wind that had got up at dusk was still blowing east to west - up the lake; but it had calmed down to just a gentle breeze.

Still sitting on my camp chair, I picked up my head lamp and set its elastic band around my head. I adjusted the reflector to a position over my left eyebrow. The lamp was ready.

I took my .458 Magnum from Ben and removed a round from the cartridge belt around my waist. I opened the bolt and pushed the extra cartridge on top of those that were already in the magazine. I held it in place with my thumb, and pushed it forward into the breech with the bolt-head. I closed the bolt softly and put the rifle on safe. The rifle was ready.

I was ready!

"*You two guys stay here,*" I instructed Ben and the headman. "*I am going in alone.*"

I stood for a few moments, then, and looked down at the camp fire. Gazing into the simmering hot coals of a hardwood fire never fails to calm my wavering nerves. *Now I was really ready!*

I walked quietly round the cropland until I was directly downwind of the hippo. There I stood still for some time, listening to the hippo feeding. It was *crop-cropping* away without a care in the world; and I guessed it was somewhere in the middle of the cultivated land.

Slowly, I began my stalk - with my nose pushing directly into the wind. Always confident in my own abilities, I believed that as long as I was silent I would be able to approach the feeding hippo without detection. And I bargained on seeing it in the moonlight before it saw me. I had no intention of using the torch on my head. It was only there for an emergency. I was quite sure that once I had the animal visual, I would have no trouble putting a

bullet into its huge lungs, at close range, using the light of the full moon only.

Quietly approaching my quarry in the moonlight was the way I had hunted bush pigs in my father's mealie lands in my youth. There was one difference, however: the white farmers' maize crops were always well fertilized, so the plants were both taller, and their foliage much thicker, than was the case in this Batonka crop. On my father's farm, I always knew where the pigs were feeding - by the sounds of their exuberant munching; and by the sounds they made when they pushed maize plants over to get at the cobs that were located high above the ground.

The comparative sparseness of this Batonka mealie crop, therefore - I thought - and the much bigger size of the hippo (compared to a pig) - would make this an easier hunt.

In the moonlight, the monochrome reflections inside the mealieland were full of light and dark tones. To find this hippo, I realised, I would have to actually see it moving.

My plan of action was to get within easy range; to snuggle into the rifle's wooden stock; to '*comfortably aim*' at the hippo's gigantic lung (in my imagination); and to pull the trigger. A brain shot would have been my first choice but a good lung shot would be a much safer bet given all the circumstances. I planned to let the final action be determined by the events as they unfolded; and by the way the target presented itself.

I was confident in myself and I believed all I had to do was to find the hippo. My rifle would do the rest - or so I thought! Finding the hippo, however, was easier said than done.

I progressed slowly and silently - like a ghost! I was determined that the hippo would not hear my approach. The range between me and my quarry gradually shortened: 50... 40... 30... 20 yards. All the while the wind remained gentle and steady. Everything was going fine for me. The universe, it seemed, was on my side.

I hardly made a sound but the hippo must have heard '*something*' because suddenly it ceased its munching.

I stood my ground. Still! Silent! The wind brushed my face, reassuringly,

from the front. There was no chance the hippo had smelt me. Not a sound came from it. I remained frozen and silent for at least half-an hour. The wind remained good. Nothing happened. All hippo feeding sounds had ceased and there was no movement from it. It was exasperating.

I couldn't stand there - still and expectant - for the rest of the night. So I started to canvas for a glimpse of my elusive quarry. Most of the maize plants were no taller than my head and a lot of them had been extensively trampled. Surely, at 20 yards range - under these wide open crop conditions - I should be able to see the hippo's black mass? Nothing!

Very slowly, very cautiously, I started to move again. My ears were acutely alert. My eyes roamed everywhere. My nerves, by this stage, were standing out like six inch nails. I ventured closer to where I believed the hippo had been when I had last heard it eating. Nothing! I peered through the mealies. There were shadows everywhere but none vaguely resembled an animal the size of a hippo.

After a while, discretion proved the better part of valour. I began to understand that the hippo had not run away. It was '*somewhere*' in the same mealieland in which I was traipsing around. It must, therefore, know exactly where I was. And I realised that if this hippo suddenly charged me from close quarters, there was only a very slim chance that I would be able to brain shoot it with my first shot; and that there would only be time for one shot!

I retreated from the scene slowly and as quietly as I could. I reluctantly accepted that the hippo had somehow given me the slip. I had heard no sound of it running or sneaking away. Even if it had moved through the mealies like a mouse, there would have been rustles as it pushed through the stalks, and there hadn't been a nuance of any such noise.

As I was retreating, I remembered the hippo at Kazungula ten years previously. That animal, too, had seemingly disappeared into thin air. I remembered it as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. The similarities in the two hunts were astounding.

It was one o'clock in the morning when I returned to the village. The headman was still sitting with Ben. They were both, however, fast asleep - in upright positions. The fire was all but dead in front of them.

“*Kanjahn?*” Ben asked, suddenly waking up from his stupor. *What happened?*

“*Anghaaaasi...*” I replied, drawing the word out lazily. *I don’t know.*

I sat down on my camp chair and the headman silently pushed the smouldering ends of the logs back onto the hot coals. The fire began to smoke. Then it burst into flames. I was tired and jaded.

I told them what had happened. “*Hah!*” The headman exploded.

“*uMtagati!*” *Magic!*

I shook my head. It wasn’t magic. But *something* had happened that I could not explain.

“*I am sure the hippo is still in there,*” I told my two companions. “*But I don’t know how to find it... and it would have been stupid for me to keep wandering about amongst the mealies when the hippo knew I was in the cropland with it.*”

“*Yah!*” Ben agreed. “*You were stupid to go in there, alone, in the first place,*” he opined uncharacteristically. I looked at him, surprised at his bold remark. Then I saw the smirk on his face. The normally taciturn Bushman was having fun with me. Wonders never cease! I let it pass. I enjoyed Ben when he was in these mirthful, teasing, moods. They didn’t happen often.

“*Do you know where the hippo’s path is?*” I asked the headman - to get us back onto the important subject. “*It will probably use the same path every night - to go back and forth from the lake.*”

“*Yes,*” he replied. “*There is a path...*”

“*Can you take me to it now?*” I asked him.

“*Of course,*” he replied with alacrity, immediately standing up.

“*We must take our chairs with us,*” I stated adamantly. “*We’re probably going to have to wait until the dawn and it will be more comfortable sitting on a canvas camp chair than sitting with our bums on the hard, cold ground.*”

“*I will carry your chair, Nkosi,*” the headman offered happily. He went off to his big kitchen hut and returned with two spears and a little knobkerrie

axe. He hooked the axe over his shoulder then picked up his stool and my camp chair. Ben picked up his camp chair; and we set off together with the headman leading the way.

In the bright moonlight we followed a well-beaten native footpath that led straight down to the lake edge. Long before we reached the water, however, the old man veered to the left. We walked for another 50 yards through the open bush until we came across the tramline tracks of a well-used hippo path.

Most animals place one foot in front of the other when they walk. Even the giant elephant does so. Not the hippo. Its body is too fat to allow that degree of pedestrian mobility. Hippos leave two parallel lines of footprints - almost touching but distinctly separate. A well-worn hippo path, therefore, resembles a set of city tramlines.

We settled down next to the pathway in open mopani woodland. From that position, even if the hippo came past before it was light we would see it when it was really close. And we would hear it approaching from some distance away. So we waited, sitting on our chairs... and we watched... and we listened... in silence!

I arranged my camp chair next to the trunk of a large mopani tree against which I could lean my back. None of the others had such a luxury. *R.H.I.P.*, I thought unashamedly. *Rank has its privileges.*

The wind was blowing gently up-lake across the line of the path. There was no way the hippo would scent us, therefore, on its way back to the water. I sat with my face into the wind so that if the breeze changed I would feel it on my skin.

The night air was warm but it became cooler as the dawn approached. And as the night advanced so the moon sank ever lower towards the western horizon.

It was still dark, and I was dozing heavily, when the hippo came walking down the path. Ben heard it when it was still some distance away. He leant over the short space between our chairs and gave me a nudge. I was instantly awake.

“*What’s it?*” I asked Ben in a whisper.

“*Umvubu... yena bwiya,*” He answered me softly. *The hippo... It is coming.*

The old headman began fidgeting.

“*SHhuuuuush...!*” I cautioned him quickly. *Be quiet!*

The breeze had remained constant - gently blowing across our position towards the upper reaches of the lake. I sat still and listened. Ben was right. I could distinctly hear *something* walking down the slope towards us. How he knew it was a hippo I had no idea. But I trusted his judgement and prepared for action.

I picked up my headlamp from the ground next to my chair and handed it to Ben - complete with the battery box to which it was connected with a long lead. It was going to be his job to light up the night at the right moment.

I stood up and stretched. My shirt and body were damp with dew. My rifle was propped up against the tree trunk behind where I was sitting. I retrieved it and wiped the moisture off its surface with my hands - then I dried the palms of my hands on the front of my short trousers. The rifle still felt damp. So I pulled my shirt tails out from my trousers and wiped the weapon properly dry.

I moved behind the mopani tree and leant up against its trunk. My camp chair was then in front of me, under the rifle’s barrel. The weapon had been loaded and cocked all night long. I slipped the safety catch. Ben stood on the other side of the tree trunk - the torch was in his hands ready to be switched on.

Except for the gentle sounds of distant footpads hitting the ground - growing ever closer - silence reigned.

The moon was then too low on the horizon to provide much light but the stars overhead were bright. My eyes were adjusted to our surroundings and I could see the shapes and sizes of the trees all around me. The ground was a uniform dark grey. I judged that I would be able to at least see its shape when the hippo got closer.

We waited - at the ready - in silence.

A dark form materialised out of the night directly in front of me. Ben had been right. It was the hippo. When it was just 20 yards away I prepared myself to aim and fire.

I flashed a whisper to Ben: "*Fakah!*" *Switch on!*

The bright light of the little head lamp burst through the darkness and Ben quickly focussed the beam on the hippo's head. The animal stopped instantly and, before it could react, I pulled the trigger.

The hippo dropped in its tracks with a bullet through its brain. Ben kept the light on it for several long seconds more - to make absolutely sure it was dead. It didn't move a muscle. The hippo was dead all right. Stone dead!

Chipinda Pools 1973

In 1973 I was tasked with culling the Gonarezhou National Park's excessive hippo population by 300 animals. I removed the bulk of this number (270) from the big pools in the lower Lundi River and I obtained permission to take off the remaining 30 animals at Chipinda Pools, on the upper Lundi. There I set about shooting one or two hippos every week, or every other week, for native staff rations.

These animals were removed either by me or by Charles Mackie, the station's young game ranger. We shot them at night in the light of a very bright spotlight - all single brain shots to the head. Charles and I took turns driving the Land Rover whilst one of us, plus my tracker, Ben - who held the spotlight - stood on the back of the vehicle to carry out the shooting. These killings were all very clinical. There was nothing extraordinary about them... except what followed one evening after I had shot two hippos alongside the native compound.

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Hippos start vacating the river pools shortly after sunset. By nine o'clock the pools are empty and silent. Unweaned babies are secreted away by their mothers amongst the rocks at the water's edge, or in the reed-beds nearby, just before their mothers go out to graze. Adults, sub-adults and half-grown individuals, normally feed as singletons. The biggest number I have ever encountered far from water at night was two - always comprising a cow and her sub-adult calf. They graze all night long on dry land away from the river - sometimes many miles from the water - and they return to the river pools just before, or just after, dawn.

One night Charles picked me up from my home shortly after an early supper. My eight year old son, Mark, accompanied us. Our first task that evening was to visit the compound to pick up my tracker, Ben.

Despite there being several hundred hippos at Chipinda Pools, it was not always possible to find them once they had left the river environs. They had an uncanny ability to simply vanish in the dark. When hunting hippos on dry land at night, therefore, we had to be prepared to spend several hours on our quest each night.

On this particular night, I elected to take first watch - to be the first shooter from the back of the vehicle. That meant Charles was the driver. As usual, he and I had planned to change places every hour.

We first drove along the 400 yards of dirt track that ran along the high Lundi

River bank. The track then turned abruptly to the right, and it passed through a 100 yards wide shallow depression before climbing onto higher ground beyond - to where the native compound was located. This was where, in small brick houses, the junior native staff lived.

Along that first 400 yards of dirt track there were dense reed beds and deep river pools on our left hand side; and on our right there was the depression - in which grew a number of large acacia thorn trees and heavy swards of *Panicum maximum* grass.

The Land Rover was equipped with a very bright spotlight that ran off the vehicle's battery; and I had placed a large burlap sack filled with river sand on the back decking, up against the back of the cab. Its purpose was to enable Mark - when he stood on it - to see over the top of the cab.

Charles drove slowly and carefully whilst Mark and I, standing on the back of the vehicle, enjoyed the fresh warm breeze blowing in our faces. Across the depression, on the high ground on the far right hand side, we saw the meagre lights of the compound -generated by paraffin storm lanterns and outside cooking fires.

There was no moon. It was, therefore very dark and the headlights lit up the road brightly.

As we drove into the depression, two hippos - a cow and her three-quarter-grown heifer calf - materialised out of the darkness. They started hurrying along the road in front of the Land Rover.

Charles immediately brought the vehicle to a halt and killed both its engine and the headlights. It was the exact right thing to do. I grabbed the spotlight from Mark's hands and switched it on.

I flicked the beam erratically back and forth across the hippos' bodies. This confused them. They came to a standstill, mesmerised by their own wavering shadows on the bare ground of the road in front of them. They were no more than 20 paces away directly in front of the Land Rover.

“Mark,” I said quickly. “Hold the spotlight on the hippos. Keep the beam steady on the big one’s head and stand very still.” He had been hunting with me at night many times before and, small as he was, he knew exactly what to do.

Charles sat unmoving in the cab. He, too, knew exactly what to do. He had to sit perfectly still. I needed a solid and absolutely stable platform from which to fire my shots.

My .458 Magnum was already loaded. I flicked off the safety catch and leant over the top of the cab, my elbows on the roof.

Both hippos were standing completely immobile. They seemingly believed that, by standing still, they would be invisible. They were utterly confused by the very bright light.

They were positioned at an oblique angle, facing away from me, their heads hanging low. This gave me perfectly clear shots at their brains - through the rear top-sides of their necks into the backs of their skulls.

I sent a bullet flying through the big cow’s brain. It dropped dead in the middle of the road, its body jerking silently in spasms. The heifer stumbled to one side. Then it, again, stood still. My next bullet sent it crashing to the ground, too. In next to no time, therefore, we had two dead hippos lying in the middle of the road. It was one of the easiest hippo night hunts I had ever conducted.

Now begins the interesting part of this story.

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Following the two shots came the echoes of their reverberations all along the steep northern wall of the Chihunja mountain range. Like claps of thunder the resonant booms rolled along the mountain face getting ever more distant, until all their energies were exhausted.

When the cacophony was over an eerie silence reigned.

The crickets in the grass had ceased their cricking. The nightjars on the river and in the mopani woodland nearby were silent. A giant eagle owl that had been grunting softly in the trees below my house stopped its moaning. And the chatter of people in the compound was extinguished.

“Kanjani Nkosi?” someone in the compound shouted at us. *What’s going on?*

It was Ben. I recognised his voice. He had been waiting for us to pick him up for the night’s hunting adventure. Nobody else said a word. Everybody was waiting for the answer.

“Two hippos,” I shouted back at my tracker.

“Yena Ifileh?” Are they dead?

“Yah...” I answered, shouting to make my voice carry up to the compound.

Charles got out the Land Rover.

“Can you take it from here?” I asked him. *“There is no point in both of us hanging around all night.”*

“Yah... Sure,” he replied.

Charles shouted back to Ben, telling him to get all the staff down to the carcasses immediately. He instructed the station’s native driver - whom he surmised must be listening to the conversation, too - to go and get the station’s 5 ton Bedford lorry from the workshop; and to bring felling axes and sharp knives to the carcasses. As an afterthought he told him to bring paraffin-pressure Tilley lamps from the workshop, too. Nobody can work outside during a pitch black night without good light.

Charles and the boys had a long night ahead of them. Both carcasses had to

be gutted and cut up into manageable sections. The quartered meat, still with the skin on - had to be transported to the workshop by lorry, there to be hung on hooks in the butchery. It would be worked on properly after breakfast in the morning - but it had to go through the first stages of preparation immediately.

It wasn't long before every resident in the compound was wandering down the slope from their houses, to have a look at the dead hippos. Men, women and children all wanted to see the carcasses; and they walked down the path with all sorts of paraffin lanterns lighting their way. This was the first time any of the women and children had ever seen, or been able to touch, a dead hippo; and none of them wanted to forego this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity before the butchering commenced.

Very soon both carcasses were surrounded by a mass of humanity. The people's loud chatter developed into a cacophony of voices. There were lights everywhere - even before I left the scene - and Charles was amongst the staff, directing key personnel to specific tasks.

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"Come....Let's go home," I said to Mark. He had seen dead hippos and elephants, and several other species of wild animals, being butchered many times before. So dragging him away that night was no big deal.

There was a well trodden footpath that led from the compound to the office, to the workshop, and to my own house beyond. It followed a more direct route than the dog's leg road we had just used. Mark and I, therefore, set off along this path, leaving behind the strident *'yakkety-yak'* of the people gathered around the carcasses.

I walked in front. Mark followed two paces behind me.

The grass was tall and the path - wide and well used - showed up as a pale winding strip through the darker bush in the colourless light of the stars. It followed the lowest part of the depression. There were small clumps of

acacia trees all around and the path twisted and turned around their trunks and thorny hanging branches.

As I walked along I removed the live cartridge from the breech of my rifle and pushed it back into the magazine. I took a round from my cartridge belt and pressed it into the magazine, too. A fourth one went into the breech. I turned the safety catch. That ritual had become second-nature to me over the years. It gave me three rounds in the magazine and one up the spout. My rifle was, therefore, once again full. I was then ready for any eventuality... or so I thought.

We hadn't gone 50 yards before I bumped up a very large hippo bull. It was lying flat on the ground, silent and motionless. I was about to stumble over it. My next step would have been to kick its rump - when it erupted right at my feet and took off like an express train into the night.

I saw nothing - just a colossal dark blur as the hippo rose up alongside me and raced off into the brush. I stopped dead and brought the rifle to bear. I couldn't even remember snapping off the safety catch. My heart was pounding; my breath racing. My whole body was suddenly flushed with blood. I could feel its heat blasting out in every direction.

Once on the move the hippo didn't stop. It tore through the grass and thorn scrub like a demented juggernaut. The pounding beat of its rotating feet was all so familiar.

It crossed the dirt road on the river bank, raced over the sandy ridge, and launched itself into the dense reed beds beyond. Once in the reeds, the sound of its flight changed to a strident roar of continuous rattles - as the hollow canes, *en masse*, resisted the hippo's mercurial flight. Then it dived into one of the river's many deep water channels with a monumental splash.

And, suddenly, the night was once again very quiet.

There was now not a sound coming from the throng of people who had gathered around the carcasses. They, too, had heard the flight of the hippo.

They stood frozen, spell-bound, with the realisation of what Mark and I had just experienced. Nobody could possibly have misinterpreted the sounds of the hippo's escape.

I stood perfectly still throughout the performance. My rifle was at the ready - but useless in my hands. Had that hippo tackled me instead of running away, I would not be here to tell this tale. I had quite literally been within touching distance of its recumbent body - physically on the verge of tripping over it - when it had erupted. Its grey-black skin had been perfect camouflage in the night.

Mark and I had been very lucky!

"You O.K., Mark?" I asked diffidently.

"Yes, Dad," he answered succinctly. There was a quaver in his voice.

I couldn't blame him for being scared. So was I. My heart continued to beat like a kettledrum. My chest was tight and my breathing shallow; and the sudden heat continued to radiate out from my body as though I was a furnace. There was a vibrant quiver in my hands and my body was, deep down, quaking like a jelly.

The explosion of that hippo right under my feet had come out of the blue. It was the last thing I expected. I had been walking along *'with my thumb up my bum and my mind in neutral'* when... *HWALLAH!*

"That", I said to myself, *"is how people get themselves killed!"*

"KANJAN MAHOHBOH?" It was Ben shouting at me from the carcasses. I enjoyed it when he used my African honour name. *"Are you all right?"*

"Yah.... We are all right, thank you," I shouted back. *"It has gone... We are going back home now."*

The hubbub around the carcasses started up again but not for long. The

women departed, *post haste*, with their children to the safety of their nearby homes in the compound.

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I lay in bed that night and pondered the circumstances of that evening's event.

The hippo that Mark and I had flushed, I concluded, was there when we drove past in the Land Rover. It probably interpreted the vehicle's encirclement of its position as having its escape route to the river cut off. At that point it must have decided to stand very still and to let the vehicle go by.

This is my further supposition: It had been standing there when we intercepted the two hippos on the road; and when it heard the shooting it had dropped flat onto the ground where it lay doggo. It had endured the drum-roll reverberations as the echoes of the shots rumbled along the Chihunja mountain range. And it hadn't moved an inch when the enthusiastic crowd had gathered noisily around the carcasses - just 50 yards away. And all the shouting - to and fro - had not induced it to move either. Only when I had virtually stood on top of it, did the hippo get up and go - racing pell-mell for the river.

I wondered what would have happened had I walked onto its head instead of its rump. I rather think I would have been instantly slashed to pieces. And just the thought of that happening gave me goose pimples.

The most important lesson I learned that night, however, took me back to Kazungula in 1955; and to the Sebungwe Narrows in 1964. In both of those hunting adventures the hippos had disappeared, inexplicably, seemingly into the ether. Now I knew why - because they had simply lain down where they had been standing to escape what they perceived to be potential danger.

I am not for one minute suggesting that this lying-doggo-behaviour happens every time a hippo is disturbed on land, by man, at night. What I am saying is that it happens frequently - probably more regularly than we really

understand or believe. It is, therefore, definitely a hippo survival strategy. This behaviour, to my knowledge, has never been recorded anywhere before! And it took me 18 years to figure it out!

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The finale to this mini book - the story I am about to tell you now - is an epic. It is probably the most unusual hippo hunt ever written.

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In the first two hippo hunting adventures that I quoted (above), I 'lost' my quarry in the middle of the night. And I never heard them running away. They simply *'disappeared'*.

On the Chipinda Pools hippo ration hunt in 1973, I bumped-up a hippo that had definitely been hiding away - by lying doggo flat on the ground - whereafter it raced back - all a-bluster - to the nearby Lundi River.

These experiences led me to suspect that when disturbed on land at night, and when the cover is good, instead of running away from potential trouble, many hippos quietly settle onto the ground and lie doggo; and they let the cause of the disturbance move away *from them*. I was keen to confirm this behaviour.

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In 1974 I captured and translocated 30 hippos from a pool in the Sabi River - during which exercise I perfected the use of a very potent paralysing drug called phencyclidine. So when Provincial Game Warden, Doug Newmarch, asked me if I would try to capture and move a problem hippo out of Kyle National Park, I eagerly agreed.

It was a young bull that had taken to grazing the watered and fertilized lawns in the Kyle camping ground; and when wandering all over the green grass at night, it periodically tripped over guy ropes and collapsed tents on top of sleeping visitors. There had been a number of incidents when irate young campers had stormed out from beneath their fallen canvas to confront whoever was messing with their equipment - and they came face to face with the hippo. The animal was never aggressive but there was always the chance that someone would get hurt.

I went to Kyle - on the day before a full moon - to catch the hippo; to take it to nearby Mushandike National Park; and there to release it into the Mushandike dam.

When I arrived at Kyle, I immediately sent my Bushman tracker, Ben, to track the animal down and to determine its nocturnal movements. As I had suspected, there was a single well-worn hippo path linking the camping ground to the lake shore.

I discussed the logistics with Kyle's game warden, Paul Read. Our biggest problem was how to transport the animal to Mushandike once we had caught it. I rejected the only large-animal crate extant at Kyle at that time because its timbers were rotten. We also had no roller-ramps to lift a massively heavy hippo-laden crate from the ground onto a lorry.

Paul had helped me on a black rhino capture exercise in 1969 and he still had the old rhino sleigh we had used on that occasion. It was propped up against the outside wall of the Kyle workshop under the eaves; and it was still in good shape.

The transport distance was only 40 miles. So I decided to strap the paralysed hippo onto the sleigh and to take it, like that, on the back of an open 5-ton lorry, to Mushandike. I anticipated the journey would take about one hour.

Paul made two thick plank ramps to pull the hippo, on its sleigh, onto the back of the lorry. I had used such simple equipment on black rhino before and, primitive though it may have been, I knew it worked.

We had the travelling logistics sorted! Now, we could set about planning a hunt to dart the hippo.

The hippo spent all day in the vast waters of Lake Kyle, so I would have to catch it at night when it was on dry land.

We had two options: to dart it in the camping ground; or to dart it on its path. Wherever we darted it, however, we had to contrive a way to stop it running straight back into the lake. If that happened, and the drug took effect after the hippo reached the water, it would drown. The drug took about 15 minutes to work.

I walked the hippo path with Ben and Paul and we selected a place to dart it

that was 400 yards back from the lake shore. Here the path ran through the middle of a long vlei (grassland) 100 yards wide. There were two convenient five-foot tall granite boulders at our chosen darting site - 10 yards from the path - which would provide us with cover. And there were two strips of evergreen forest running along the edges of granite dwalas (solid rock domes) on either side of the vlei.

The prevailing wind was blowing diagonally across the vlei and away from the lake shore. Perfect! So it seemed, for the moment, the universe was smiling on us.

We examined the lake shore where the hippo emerged every night. A number of climbable trees were growing at the water's edge and there was a jumble of boulders downwind of the path. On the spur of the moment, I hatched a plan that I hoped would discourage the hippo from running straight back to the water after it had been darted.

Paul and I went back to the lake shore with six native game scouts, mid-afternoon. I instructed them to each select a tree that they could climb - 20 yards apart - and I hid them amongst boulders - down-wind - with instructions to sit very still, out of sight, and not to talk. Paul provided them with a walkie-talkie radio.

The leader of the scouts was to click the radio transmission button three times when he saw the hippo leave the water. That would be enough to tell us it was on its way.

After delivering that message, the scouts were to remain sitting tight and to await further instructions. On a second radio signal - when Paul would tell them to "GO!" - they were to emerge from the boulders and walk to the bases of their chosen trees. When they reached their trees they were to enter into a continuous discussion - on any subject they liked. I instructed them to speak in reasonably loud voices but not to shout.

The purpose of this subterfuge was to inform the hippo - *before the darting* - that there were people on the ground, behind it, at the water's edge. I hoped that that would be enough deterrent to stop it from racing back to the water *after the darting*.

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That night my capture gun was equipped with a silencer and a telescopic sight. At dusk, with a loaded dart in the chamber, Paul, Ben and I sat down to wait. My weapon lay on top of my jacket which I had spread over the top of one of the rocks.

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Half an hour after sunset we received the terse radio signal telling us the hippo had left the water. We prepared ourselves for its arrival. The light breeze was unchanged and constant.

Soon we saw the hippo - very clearly - walking slowly towards us in the bright moonlight.

My plan of action was based on conjecture. But, in fact, I really didn't know what the hippo would do when my dart struck home. I sincerely believed, nevertheless, that those chatting game scouts along the lake shore would deter it from running straight back to the water.

I further anticipated that, after it was darted, the hippo would run into one of the forest strips; and that there it would go to ground. We would hear where and when it stopped running; and that is where we would look for it - with torches - half an hour later.

When the hippo was 100 yards from us, Paul gave his instruction: "GO!" One minute later we heard the scouts talking to each other. The voices were mute but discernible. Perfect!

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The hippo heard the voices, too, and it stopped dead in its tracks. It turned its head to listen and it remained absolutely still for several minutes. I willed it to ignore the hubbub and to continue on its way up the path. It was then still far too far away to dart.

The hippo now knew that its escape route had been blocked. I felt sure, therefore, that - after I had darted it - it would not rush back the way it had come.

Then, quietly and deliberately, the hippo turned off its path. It walked through the veld, from our left front to the right, moving in the direction of

the closest granite kopje. It took its time, moving like a wraith. Finally, it disappeared into the forest fringe at the base of the dwala.

We had seen and we had heard the hippo, when it was walking towards the dwala. Just as soon as it entered the forest edge, however, all sounds ceased.

The hippo had heard the voices on the lake shore and had considered them a threat, not a big or immediate danger, but a warning that should not be ignored. Because the voices were so relatively far away, I had hoped the hippo would have continued walking along its path, but that had not happened. I had misjudged its reaction.

I wondered if it had climbed the sloping granite dwala and if it was, at that moment, sneaking back to the water on the other side of the hill.

Then - suddenly - I knew what had happened. The hippo had gone to ground! It was lying up, hiding amongst the rocks and bushes inside the forest edge. It was waiting, listening and evaluating the danger represented by the distant voices behind it. This is what I had hoped the hippo would do *after* its darting.

Now we had a problem: How to find the hiding hippo in the middle of the forest? I was back at Kazungula.... back at the Sebungwe Narrows.

Leaving Paul behind, Ben and I made our way towards where I had seen the hippo enter the tree line. I had a switched-off hunting lamp on my forehead and the capture gun in my hands. Ben carried my .458 Magnum. My tracker had great senses and I valued his support in situations like this. This was a job for him and me alone. Paul, added to the mix, would have been a liability.

The bright full moon hung in the sky above. Its monochrome light coated the bushes and rocks all around with a silvery mist. The atmosphere was eerie.

We cautiously entered the forest. I stopped to listen. Ben stopped immediately behind me. I did not know what I expected to hear... maybe the sound of the hippo breathing.... maybe the sound of movement?

Nothing! My nerves began to crawl.

I knew what I was looking for - a hippo that was lying flat on the ground,

hiding. How I was going to find it was another matter. We were surrounded by small bushes and large black boulders any one of which could have been the hippo.

I switched on the headlamp and cast the beam about. Nothing! I switched off the light and stood still. And I listened. Nothing! The hippo was very close. I *knew* it was somewhere *very* close. I could *feel* its presence.

We quietly climbed onto the granite dwala and walked a few paces along the solid slope, using the torch to look down into the brush below. Nothing! We retreated, got back into the undergrowth, and switched the light off.

Switching the light on had ruined my night vision. All it had done was to illuminate the foliage directly in front of the beam. Whatever lay behind the bushes remained in black and impenetrable shadow. The torch had been a waste of time!

I waited 10 minutes - standing perfectly still - until my eyes had again adjusted to the darkness. Ben stood quietly at my side - slightly behind me. He said not a word. There was no need for us to communicate. Our minds were attuned - like two peas in the same pod. He moved only when I moved. And the fact that he was carrying my big rifle gave me confidence. I gave no thought as to how I would be able to use it if I had to, but at least it was '*there*'. It was my proverbial '*Lina's blanket*.'

Where the moon leaked through the forest canopy, all I could see were silvery grey leaves and very dark shadows. Nevertheless, I could truly '*see*' better without the torch beam; or rather, without the torch. I had a much better perspective of the vegetation that surrounded me.

We inched our way through the forest, moving very slowly, covering very little ground - using our ears more than any other faculty. I examined every large black boulder that I came across - minutely - looking at the shape; looking for movement; listening for breathing - just in case it was the hippo.

I tried to think as I imagined the hippo would be thinking.

After what seemed an eternity we were still right on the edge of the tree line. In ten minutes we had penetrated no more than ten paces. I realised, however, that the hippo had had to travel only a short distance into the forest to get all the cover that it needed; and I was guided by the fact that it had only

just penetrated the forest edge when all sound of its movement had ceased. Those indicators told me it must be somewhere very close to where Ben and I were standing. The experience was surreal - and, deep down, very frightening.

We continued as before... creeping through the thick brush in extreme slow motion. Periodically, I stood very still, all my senses acutely alert. Ben said not a word. When I moved, he moved. When I stopped, he stopped.

'This is crazy,' thought responsibly at last. *'All this hippo has to do is to make one short sharp rush and it would chomp us both.'*

I began to think that I should send Ben back to the forest edge. I had no right to risk his life like this. Then I thought: *'I should go back myself. This is a stupid and suicidal mission.'* I knew that if we bumped into the hippo head-on our demise would be all over in a matter of seconds.

There was no chance, under any circumstance, of me ever being able to use the .458 Magnum to defend us. Why I had even brought it along, therefore, I did not know.

Furthermore, if the hippo was so close - as I knew it was - it would know exactly where we were. It, therefore, held all the important cards in this dangerous game of hide-and-seek.

I believed I had one advantage. Deep down in my psyche, I now knew *for sure* that hippos, under threat at night, hide themselves away by lying doggo. So I felt I knew exactly what the hippo was doing.

What to do? I did nothing. I stood and I listened. All my senses probed the darkness trying to pick up something that would tell me where the hippo was located. Ben stood stoic - still and silent. He was always just behind me on my right hand side.

In the faraway distance I could still hear the game scouts talking to each other. It was exactly what I had wanted them to do - but my plan, in every other dimension, had gone terribly awry.

'But... If I could get a dart into this hippo now,' I thought, *'the scouts would have served their purpose.'* I was absolutely certain - NOW - that the hippo, once darted, would not run back to the lake. I had its measure!

Then I smelt it. It was not a strong smell - just the nuance of a scent - but it penetrated instantly into my subconscious mind.

“*Hah!*” I heard Ben exclaim softly under his breath behind me. He had smelt it, too.

I pushed my hand towards him - whilst still looking forward - groping with my right hand to my right rear. I touched him on the arm... patted his forearm softly.... telling him that I had smelled it, too.

Maybe the hippo had farted - softly - inaudibly? Maybe it was just a trace of old dung stuck to its anus. Hippos scatter their dung as they defecate by furiously wagging their very short tails. That is the way they mark their territories on land. Maybe faint traces of its last defecation were still releasing their aroma. The scent was not at all malodorous... but it was definitely ‘hippo’.

Then I thought: *‘Maybe it wasn’t a dung smell at all. Could it be the smell of fear that we had detected? ... of anxious sweat from the pores of the hippo’s skin?’* Had I been that hippo at that moment, knowing full well that two hunters were standing right on my tail, I would be sweating like a pig.

Maybe it wasn’t sweat at all. Perhaps it was the hippo’s pheromone of fear that we had detected - reaching out to us - warning us to beware? But no sooner did that idea take root than I discarded it. It couldn’t have been a pheromone. Pheromones are colourless, odourless and tasteless. What I had smelt was tangible. Pheromones are ethereal.

Whatever! Once I had picked up that scant whiff I knew we were standing right on top of our quarry.

It had happened - that breath of a scent. It had lasted just one short second in time. Then it was gone. But it told me - and Ben - what we needed to know. We were, indeed, very, very close to our target. It was just upwind of us.

I lifted my nose to the breeze, trying to remember the exact direction the air had been moving when we were standing next to the big rocks in middle of the vlei. I had to be sure. So I pushed my face into the softly moving air and let it play over my skin - until I had the direction pegged. For that nuance of the hippo’s scent to have reached us, it must be lying somewhere very close

to my left front. I looked into the breeze very hard.

All I could see were big black boulders in the dappled moonlight. They were all of a size that could be a hippo. And under the branches and bushes all around us were huge black holes in the shadows that could easily have hidden a hippo. It was time to use the spotlight again. I switched it on and cast the beam around - into the wind.

There were several boulders of weathered granite within 10 yards range. They were rounded and black in colour, and they were all about the right size. Nothing moved. I looked at each rock carefully.

Then, in the shadows, two tiny red-pink markers reflected back at me.

'What could they be?' I focused the torch beam on them - and suddenly recognised them for what they were. They were the hippo's ears seen from behind. Success at last!

Those ears told me two things: (1) That the black mass on the ground, just two paces in front of me, was the hippo's hind quarters; and (2) that it was facing diagonally away from me.

I was so close, if I had leant forward and held the capture gun at arm's length by the pistol grip, I could have touched the hippo's rump with the muzzle.

The hippo did not move a muscle.

Slowly I lifted the capture gun to my shoulder and soundlessly nuzzled the safety catch off. There was no need to aim. I pointed the weapon at a spot right in the middle of what I now knew was the hippo's left buttock; and I squeezed the trigger.

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The silencer worked like a charm. There wasn't so much as a *'smut'* when the dart left the barrel. There was a flash of silver-aluminium and of the dart's red, white and blue goose-feather fletches in the torchlight. The dart struck well - and it *'stuck'*.

In an instant, the hippo bounced to its feet and spun right round to face me. Then it stopped dead. Its eyes glaring into the torch beam of my head torch - mesmerised. It didn't move.

I actually got a very great fright because I was not expecting such a close encounter with so big an animal. It stood all of five feet at the shoulder and must have weighed in excess of 3000 lbs; and it was standing looking straight into my headlamp lamplight - literally within touching distance.

The hippo didn't move! I didn't move. Ben didn't move. I kept the spotlight focussed on the animal's eyes. We were nose-to-nose. I could have touched it on the snout with the rifle's muzzle.

This was the classical stand-off. We were at an impasse. Who would give way first? I had a feeling that if Ben or I moved the hippo would lunge at us. Our best chance for survival, therefore, was to stand perfectly still; to keep the spotlight on the hippo's eyes; and to wait out however long it took for the phencyclidine to take effect.

The minutes ticked by. I began to experience muscle cramps in my legs. I kept the capture gun out from even the penumbral light of the torch. The hippo must not see any movement whatsoever; so it was vital for me to keep the spotlight steady and focussed on its eyes. It was only that light which kept it blind.

Silence reigned.

Five minutes dragged into 10 - then 15. The hippo staggered. Finally, it heaved a giant sigh and sagged to the ground.

I exhaled noisily, thankful to be able to breathe properly again. The relief I felt was unbelievable.

"Well done, Ben!" I turned to my tracker and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Hah!" Ben exclaimed loudly - now that the danger was over. "Hah!" he said again - and he shook his head in wonderment. He and I had done some pretty amazing things together over the years. This little adventure was one of the most bizarre.

We moved out to the forest edge and I shouted across the vleis to Paul, telling

him that we had successfully darted the hippo. Then we moved over to the sloping dwala wall and rested our backs and buttocks on it, awaiting Paul's arrival.

"I didn't hear it run off," Paul said when he joined us.

"It didn't," I said laughing.

"So what happened?"

"We darted it. It stood still. Then it went down. It's lying over there in the bushes - 10 to 15 yards away."

"You lie," Paul retorted - not knowing quite what to believe.

Ben laughed. *"Come Nkosi Paul. I will show you..."* Ben took my headlamp. And as they moved off together, I leant fully back on the sun-warmed granite rock and took in another deep breath. *'Phew.....'* I said to myself in my mind. *'You are getting too bloody old for this.... and one of these days you are going to run out of lives.'*

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Paul called up his game scouts on the walkie-talkie and instructed them to quickly come and join us. When they arrived he sent one of them racing back to the national park office where the lorry driver and a gang of labourers were standing by. The job now was to roll the hippo onto the sleigh, to tie it down, and then to load the sleigh with the hippo on board, onto the lorry's open decking.

It was a straight and easy drive down the vleis for the station's 5 ton Bedford lorry; and very soon the labourers had cut a track to where the paralysed hippo lay unmoving inside the forest.

I remained in attendance, all the time checking the hippo's vital signs. Ben stood next to me holding a 20 ml syringe full of hydrocortizone. There is no antidote for phencyclidine but hydrocortizone relieves adverse physical symptoms if they occur. I had no wish to give the hippo any relief, however, unless it was in absolute dire straits. I wanted it to remain recumbent throughout the journey to Mushandike.

In next to no time, we had the hippo on the old bush-built sleigh. Then we

had the problem of tying the animal down onto it.

A hippo's legs and feet taper from the elbow down to the toes. Its skin is smooth and oily to the touch. A hippo's lower legs, therefore, resemble a slippery ice-cream cone. So, trying to tie the hippo onto the sleigh, using its ankles as anchors for the ropes, was impossible. A hippo has no ankles!

Instead, we roped it round and round its fat body and we looped other ropes around the upper legs and over its back. And we had ropes passing under its armpits and between its back legs - which efforts, in the end, were all to no avail. The only places where we could rope it securely were around its neck and upper jaw.

The front part of a hippo's top jaw is very broad - the width of its giant nostrils - maybe 30 inches across. Halfway back, between the nostrils and the eyes, the jaw narrows to a size equal to the width of my leg just above the knee; and that central part of the skull is solid bone. The two nostril ducts pass through the middle of this narrow pedicle so they are well protected.

I tied a double and very thick buffalo hide riem (raw-hide rope) around the narrow part of the hippo's upper jaw and attached it - short and secure - to the front '*spinal*' poles of the sleigh. This was the strongest tie of them all. Another good tie was a rope that went round its neck - then secured to the sleigh.

We had some difficulty getting the hippo on its sleigh, onto the back of the lorry. Paul had made two portable ramps, from thick wooden planks, which we propped up with empty petrol drums to carry the weight.

The sleigh was pulled up the ramps by the national park's entire labour force using two-inch-thick tug-o-war ropes. We then roped the hippo, together with its sleigh, onto the superstructure of the lorry's back decking. When we had finished, the back of the lorry looked like something out of *Gulliver's Travels*.

All this took time. I began to feel nervous because I knew the hippo was fighting the phencyclidine. Sooner or later it would slough off the paralysis - and we still had 40 miles to travel to get to the Mushandike dam.

Compounding my anxieties, was the fact that I knew I was taking an enormous risk trying to move such a large and dangerous animal so

insecurely trussed up, on the open deck of a lorry.

I was worried - very worried - but what alternative did I have? The hippo would otherwise have been shot! Nothing ventured. Nothing gained. The die had been cast - quite literally - when I had darted the hippo. Now I had to make the best of what could be done.

My agitation grew as more time flew by, but eventually we set off for Mushandike. I followed the lorry in my Land Rover. In the cab of the lorry rode the driver and one black assistant.

In the Land Rover's cab, alongside me, sat Ben. He held now a prepared dose of the narcotic, morphine sulphate, in a syringe - for contingencies! I hoped we would not have to use it. I withheld the hydrocortizone altogether - not wanting to relieve the hippo's paralysis prematurely. I wanted to get to Mushandike without having to use any other drugs.

It was after 11 o'clock when we arrived in the little town of Fort Victoria. We turned off the main thoroughfare to Beit Bridge; and we took the road to Mushandike. It took us right past the cinemas.

The theatre doors had opened just before we drove by. There were throngs of people spilling out onto the roadway. And there were many jay walkers, running across the tarmac to their cars parked on the other side.

People were getting into their motorcars on both sides of the street. Car doors were being opened and slammed shut. Some of the crowd had been drinking. They were rowdy and full of mischief.

When the people realised there was a hippo on board the passing lorry, they stood and stared at us - some shouting to alert others who had not see the spectacle.

The street lamps we passed, one after the other, shed repetitive flashes of light onto the recumbent animal. These syncopated flares of illuminations, together with the growing noise of the excited crowd, stimulated the hippo into action.

Remember the hippo had been paralysed. It was not unconscious!

The hippo began to fight its constraints. Most of the ropes simply slid off its

smooth hide. They had no purchase on its limbs whatsoever. The worst case scenario was unfolding. Soon, all that was holding the hippo down, were the double loops of rawhide rope around the bridge of its nose.

It stood up on its sleigh and began to fight the riems. So, as soon as the lorry had passed through the town, I raced ahead of it and brought it to a standstill.

With loaded syringe in one hand, I climbed onto the back of the lorry and stood behind the hippo's tail. It was by then standing fully erect, and I could hear the riems wheezing and squeaking as they were being alternately stretched and relaxed. All we needed to happen at that point was to have the riems break. God knows what would have gone down then.

The riems did not break, even though the hippo continued to fight them. I injected a cocktail containing one full gram of morphine sulphate and 500 mgms of the powerful tranquillizer, Largactil, into the hippo's buttock muscles.

Then I jumped to the ground to better observe what was going to happen next. I had no idea how the hippo would react to the morphine. Morphine works well on black rhinos, so I hoped that it would have the same immobilising effect on a hippo.

The driver's eyes grew as big as saucers when he opened his cab door and looked onto the back of his lorry. The hippo was standing up on all four feet, free of all its constraints except for those two buffalo hide riems around its nose.

Some idiot drew up close behind us in his sedan motor car and stopped, shining his bright headlights onto the hippo. He had his wife and kids with him. They were all talking in high-pitched falsetto voices. The man got out of his vehicle to better see what was going on. He shouted at me: "*What the hell are you doing?*"

I screamed at him to switch off his '*bloody*' headlights - and to '*shut-up his mouth*'. Sheepishly he complied.

Other vehicles drew up behind the first one. One or two drove passed. Those which had stopped behind us also focussed their headlights on the lorry. This made the hippo struggle all the more. I was deeply conscious of the squeaky

sounds of the straining buffalo riems; and I prayed they would not snap.

“GO!” I shouted at the lorry driver. **“GO! Get to Mushandike as fast as you can.”**

The lorry took off not sparing the horses. Just outside town, it turned left onto the Shabani road. Every minute that passed took us closer to Mushandike.

I followed behind in my Land Rover - keeping a close watch on the hippo's behaviour in the penumbral zone of my suppressed headlights. We were now on our last stretch of tarmac road. Ten minutes down the Shabani road the hippo settled onto its brisket. It was still struggling but at least it was once again off its feet. I breathed a little easier.

Then we were on the dirt road leading down to the Mushandike dam - to the sloping gravel shoreline which my good friend, Game Warden Dave Rushworth, had suggested was the best place for the hippo's release. I knew exactly where it was but it seemed to take us forever to get there.

Just before midnight we arrived at the designated release point. The hippo was still lying down and it had stopped its struggles. The morphine had kicked in! Dave was there, with a bright torch, to help us unload.

I instructed the driver to drop the sides of the lorry's back decking, and the tailgate, to make it easier for the hippo to slide into the water. He then reversed the lorry directly into the water. With back wheels awash, and with water lapping over the deck at the tailgate end, I told him to cut the engine and apply the hand brake. The five of us then quickly stripped the lorry of all loose rope entanglements; and I got ready to deliver the antidote for the morphine. I had no option but to give the injection (20 mls of Lethidrone) into the muscle, which meant the hippo would take 20 minutes to fully recover.

At that point, the only thing securing the hippo were the riems - and they had been pulled very tight. That meant I would have to cut them with a sharp knife. This was a good task for my tracker's ever-sharp folding penknife.

I was now in a catch-twenty-two situation. If I cut the riems prematurely, and if the hippo slipped off the end of the lorry and entered the water whilst still

under the influence of the morphine, it would drown. On the other hand, if I waited too long, and it woke up before I had cut the riems, I would never be able to get close enough to do the cutting.

In order to sever the riems around its nose, I had to sit right next to the hippo's head - right alongside those long and razor-sharp tushes on its bottom jaw. If the animal was *compos mentis* enough to be conscious of me sawing away at the riems, it would take just one lunge - one slash of those terrible lower jaw teeth - to cut me in two.

I sat for a long time on the sleigh alongside that hippo's head: listening to its breathing; checking its eyes; watching its every movement. Significant changes in any of these would tell me it was coming round from the narcotic.

Finally, the hippo scrambled with a back leg that was slipping on the lorry's steel decking. Then it lifted its head and shook its ears noisily. Now was the time to cut. I couldn't afford to wait any longer.

I leant forward and eased the blade of the penknife into the narrow gap between the hippo's jawbone and the bleached buffalo riem. All the time I watched for any sign that would tell me the hippo knew what was going on. A simple swipe from one of those giant super-sharp tushes would sever my arm.

Slowly and softly I began to saw. The cut got deeper and deeper. The hippo snapped its head up sharply, again, and it again rattled its ears.

Cut... cut... cut... Saw...saw...saw... One of the two riems pulled apart with a jerk. I kept cutting... kept sawing.... The second riem cut through. The hippo was free.

I sidled away from the hippo's huge head and gently slipped off the side of the lorry. I joined Dave and Ben, and the two black guys from the lorry, on the ground. They had all be standing silently watching me complete that final task. They had been wondering if I was ever going cut through those damn riems.

"Cut the riems through?" Dave inquired when I joined him.

"Yah...," I said softly. *"The hippo is free. All it has to do now is to recover a little more from the morphine... then slide off the back of the lorry into the*

water.”

I stood close to the lorry and listened to the hippo's breathing. Its breaths were becoming more and more regular. With much relief I began to feel that it was going to be all right.

Suddenly the hippo jerked its head upright and it looked around wildly. It tried to push itself onto its feet but the steep backward slope of the lorry was too great. Try as it might, all it could manage was to slip and to slide over the smooth steel decking on the back of the lorry. Its back legs went over the tailgate and into the water first. Then it squirmed some more and the rest of its body slid into the dam. Within seconds it disappeared beneath the surface.

The full moon was by then past its zenith. Nevertheless, it lit up the glassy surface of the lake in a smoky mirage. Ripples from the hippo's entry into the water issued out from the lake edge. For several long minutes everything was quiet. The ripples flattened out and the surface of the lake returned to its former and immaculate mirror image.

I was worried. Very worried! We were all worried. Not a word was said and everybody held their breaths. Was the hippo lying at the bottom of the dam still paralysed? Was it still comatose from the morphine? It had had two very large doses of some very powerful drugs over the last few hours. And it had had no hydrocortizone.

Inside my breast I felt the rise of a mini-panic. I did NOT want this hippo to die! I did NOT want this mission to fail!

Then - suddenly - the hippo broke water, expelling a very loud whoosh of air. It breached a hundred yards away - well into the lake. For a few brief moments it cruised about on the surface. Then it submerged again.

I took a deep breath and let the air out of my lungs noisily. I was happy. The hippo was going to be all right.