

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 8

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)**

The Lions of Karna Block

The three years that I spent as a young game ranger at Main Camp, Hwange National Park, and (October 1960 to January 1964) were a kaleidoscope of big game hunting adventures. This period covered my maturing years as a big game hunting game ranger - when I was between 21 and 24 years of age.

No sooner had I returned to Main Camp after one exciting episode - hunting elephants, buffaloes or lions - than Bruce Austen (my immediate boss, and the game warden-in-charge of the national park) sent me out on another task. I didn't complain. It just took a long time for it to sink in that this was all really happening to *me*. Many were the times that I had to pinch myself to get me away from the idea that I had actually died and gone to heaven.

The day after I returned from a very successful 10 day elephant hunt in the Tjolotjo forest areas and sidaga country (black cotton soil wastelands), south of the game reserve boundary, Bruce sent me off to Karna Block - some 50 miles away to the east of Main Camp. There I was expected to attend to a complaint about stock-killing lions.

Karna Block was the largest private cattle ranch in Western Matabeleland. I found myself on this property many times - hunting stock-killing leopards, lions or hyenas; and, once, a crop-raiding hippo.

Karna Block was owned by the van Wyks - an old established Rhodesian family with original roots in South Africa. The domineering patriarch was an old man, well past his prime, whom everybody called *OOM van Wyk*. (*Oom* in Afrikaans means *Uncle*). He had two grown sons, Andries and Dawid, who ran the cropping and the cattle sections on the ranch, respectively.

The van Wyk family were prominent members of the Gwaai Valley Farmer's Association. The Main Camp staff, particularly, liked them because they were not shy to ask for help when lions or hyenas started killing their cattle. Many other farmers in the area - who were not expert hunters - often tried to kill the lions themselves. They were usually unsuccessful and because, in the process of their inexperienced attempts they taught the lions all the evasive tactics in the book, they created serial cattle-killers that were almost impossible to

eliminate.

Lions normally remain close to a fresh kill for several days, returning to the carcass every night to feed until there is nothing left. Lions that had been *conditioned* by an inept farmer-hunter, however, were different. One such lion - which wandered all over the cattle ranches and tribal trust lands of the Gwaai and Shangani River valleys for over a year - never went back to a kill. It had learnt that its victims had probably been poisoned or trapped, or that the farmer might be lying in wait for it to return. This lion killed, ate, and moved on; taking another beast whenever it was again hungry. That was why its score was so high!

It accounted for 101 head of valuable beef cattle in just over a year of marauding. And when a game ranger who was sent to help that farmer - after he had finally asked Bruce Austen to assist him - failed to kill the culprit quickly, the farmer spread the word in the district that: *"The game rangers of Hwange are useless hunters"*.

This did not happen with the van Wyks. No sooner did their herd-boys notify them of a lion on Karna Block, than one of the family telephoned Main Camp asking for assistance. On this occasion it was Dawid who phoned. It was his cattle that were being killed. He told Bruce that he had just learned that three lions had killed one of his cows three days before.

So I drove to Karna Block in the government Land Rover, with my two experienced Bushman trackers, Ben and Mbuyotsi. I left Main Camp straight after an early breakfast and reached the farm homestead by about nine o'clock.

Dawid was not present when we arrived at the farm house - a lovely, sprawling, old Rhodesian homestead that was perched high up on the northern rim of the Shangani River Valley escarpment. Down below us, continuous mopani woodlands ran for three miles to the banks of the Shangani River. From the house, the river was visually demarcated by a strip of green riverine forest, and on a clear day the view extended to the horizon.

I knew the ranch quite well, and Oom van Wyk told me exactly where the kill had been made. After three days, I felt certain that there would be nothing left of it, and that the lions would have moved on. We would have to look for

fresh spoor, therefore, to find out where they had gone. Dawid, meanwhile, had moved all his cattle to higher ground near the house - but it turned out enough strays had been left behind to keep the lions anchored.

Then, in his excitement about the prospect of us hunting lions on the ranch, Oom van Wyk suddenly insisted that he himself wanted to show me where the dead cow was located.

Uh-Awh, I thought. The old man has started his tricks!

Andries, who had met me on my arrival, listened to his father, shaking his head at the idea of the old man accompanying me on the hunt.

Andries, however, obediently drove his father in the farm's old rattletrap pickup truck, down the winding road of the escarpment to the valley floor. My trackers and I followed in the Land Rover.

Every time Karna Block was mentioned at Main Camp, somebody brought up the subject of *Old Man van Wyk*. He was quite an institution in the Gwaai River farming community and his obstinate *modus operandi* was very well known.

"Just remember," Bruce had warned me the evening before my departure. "The old man knows everything. And he has done everything long before any one of us mere mortals was born. So, do as he says for as long as he is saying it, then, when he runs out of steam, you can get on with the job you have been sent to do. The only way to contend with the old man's idiosyncrasies is to humour him."

I was to learn that, in actual fact, the old man ran out of steam quite quickly.

It did not take us long to reach the banks of the Shangani. In those days it was a perennial river with big deep pools of crystal clear running water. There were shallow rapids separating each pool, some of which were several hundreds of yards long and a hundred yards wide. They were surrounded by sandbars and reedbeds, and there were large pockets of riverine forest along the banks. In the early summer the steep riverbanks supported large breeding colonies of carmine and white-fronted bee-eaters - which were continuously swirling around showing off their crimson and azure-blue plumage. The Shangani River on Karna Block was a nature's paradise.

Andries pulled his pickup truck off the farm track and parked it on the river bank. There the long, dry winter grass had collapsed in a flat mat onto the ground. It had all been heavily trodden by the hooves of many cattle.

“We must have some tea before we do anything else,” the old man declared autocratically. *“Andries.... Get the tea things out.....”* Andries went about this task dutifully and silently. The old man began picking up sticks from the nearby bush preparatory to making a fire.

His big son was clearly embarrassed.

“Go and get some dry wood,” I instructed the trackers - who were standing around, looking embarrassed, too. They were observing the interaction between the old white man and his silently compliant son, in some wonderment.

It wasn't long before the trackers were back with armfuls of dry wood.

The old man beamed. *“Now get them to skoffel (scratch out) a bit with their shovel - to make an open space in the grass for a fire place,”* he instructed me, showing me exactly where he wanted it. *“They must clear grass away so that we can make a fire,”* he intoned - demanded - motioning with his hands towards the trackers. *“We don't want to start a veld fire.”*

“Andries... Take the kettle and go fetch us some water from the river,” the old man then instructed. He spoke to his adult son as though he were a little boy. I was affronted and embarrassed for Andries' sake.

Andries was a mature man, taller than his father and twice his weight.

I looked at the old man, then at Andries, and thought to myself: *‘What an old bastard!’*

“I'll get the fire going,” the old man said, breaking up some of the thinner sticks that the trackers had brought, and piling up dry grass in the middle of the open, bare soil area that the Mbuyotsi had prepared.

Andries went off to the river with the kettle.

Awaiting further instructions, I watched the old man strike a match and set his kindling alight. As the flames rose, so he added more sticks to the growing conflagration.

Just then Andries emerged in a hurry from over the rim of the river bank. He was excited and flushed with the exertion of running up the steep bank. Water splashed from the full kettle in his hands.

“There’s fresh-fresh lion tracks down at the river’s edge,” he told his father eagerly - looking at me expectantly. *“There are still whirls of suspended mud in the water where they stood....”*

The old man took off like a teenager, running hard and fast over and down the river bank, his old .303 SMLE waving about in his right hand. Andries let him pass. Then he put the kettle on the ground and ran after him.

The trackers understood what Andries had said. Mbuyotsi raced to the Land Rover to get my rifle. At that moment, however, something happened that was to determine the further order of the day.

Mbuyotsi was holding the canvas rifle case. Ben was pulling the rifle from its scabbard.

Away in the near distance, a blue vervet monkey began barracking. It was a serious alarm call.

In unison, both trackers stopped what they were doing. They stood still and listened to the monkey’s lament. It was ranting incessantly - like a chant. And the racket was coming from a position two hundred yards away downstream.

Ben looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. He raised his right hand, forefinger extended. *“Isiliwaan!”* he pronounced. *Lion!* One word!

That was all he said. It was all he needed to say. I understood. We all knew the sound of a monkey’s alarm call. The three of us also knew that that monkey was, at that very moment, telling the world that it was looking and shouting at a lion.

“Come...” I instructed the trackers, snatching up my cartridge belt from the seat of the Land Rover. I wrapped the belt around my waist and buckled it on. Ben handed me my government-issue Cogswell and Harrison .375 Magnum. He produced two rounds of ammunition which I quickly punched into the magazine. Two more filled it. I pressed the bolt home on a fifth cartridge, pushing it straight into the breech.

On this occasion - for whatever reason (I can't remember) - I did not have a second rifle with me.

"Bulala loh Mliloh," I instructed Mbuyotsi. *Kill the fire!*

Mbuyotsi ran over to Andries' kettle, picked it up, and poured the water over the burning flames. Ben and I watched him, mentally urging him on. All three of us were anxious to get going.

We gave no thought to Andries or to his father. They were big enough to sort out their own salvation. We took off, sprinting down the jeep track that ran along the top of the riverbank. It led straight towards where the monkey was shouting.

The monkey, a single big male - the blue-balled leader of a small troop - was sitting on one of the top outer branches of a giant riverine ebony tree: uMkauzaan. It was one of several that dominated the forest at that point.

We saw the monkey from some distance off. It saw us, too, and looked at us for a brief moment. Then it turned away - disinterested - ignoring us completely. Its whole focus was downwards and away from the forest edge. It barracked hoarsely and continuously at whatever it was that had caught its attention.

It must be the lions, I thought. I was sure it was the lions! With fresh-fresh spoor on the river's edge just a few hundred yards upstream what else could the monkey be shouting at?

We ran along the vehicle track towards the clump of big evergreens. As we drew closer I cautioned the trackers to slow down. Our veldskoen hunting boots were making loud slapping noises as their soles struck the ground. And, more importantly, it wouldn't help our purpose if I was puffing and panting when we caught up with the lions. I would have to have my wits about me then, and be able to shoot straight.

The monkey continued to rant.

We slowed down to a walk - and we walked side by side, Mbuyotsi to my left, Ben to my right. The pocket of forest from where the monkey was shouting loomed ever closer on our right hand side.

Ahead of us I made out the entrance to a deep and wide erosion gully (donga) on our left hand side. There were high, sheer, gray-soil banks on both sides where, over the years, a small stream had gouged away the earth to create the donga. On our side, the end of the donga wall - for fifty yards - had been completely eroded away. Here it was now just a series of undulating hillocks on which grew wiry grass and low bushes.

On the far side, the steep gray bank continued towards the river. Just before it reached the forest edge, however, the wall petered out. Throughout the basin thus created, the grass had been cropped short, like a lawn, by the continuous grazing of the farmer's cattle.

Then I saw the lions! There were three of them, all young nomadic males which had, without doubt, been recently evicted from their parental prides inside the national park. And they were totally pre-occupied. They had just caught and pulled down a cow.

One lion had it by the throat. A heavy paw was holding the beast onto the ground with strong downward pressure. By the looks of it, the young cat was still struggling to kill its prey. Its teeth were locked in a deadly grip across the cow's throat.

The other two were already ripping at different places on the animal's back legs. They were pulling off chunks of red hot flesh and swallowing it in huge gulps. From its convulsive movements I could tell that the cow was not yet dead. It was being eaten alive!

None of the lions saw us approaching. They were far too involved in killing and eating their very fresh meal.

The monkey continued to heckle.

I crawled up behind a small mound within 50 yards of my quarry. The lions could not have seen me because they continued to wrestle with their prey. They were oblivious to anything else. Lying behind the mound, and looking over its top, I was able to get a dead-rest position from which to fire. Now to select the best target!

They all seemed to be about the same size. So it didn't really matter which lion I shot first. None of them was an obvious leader. The one that had the

cow by the throat was a little more obscured than the other two - which were closer to me and easier targets.

I picked the one that was most exposed and slapped a bullet into its ribs behind the shoulder. It immediately reared up, making some bewildering sounds - half-roaring/half-wailing. It moved off to one side, running upright on its hind legs, shadow-boxing with its front paws. It fell over - and I lost interest in what it was doing.

One down two to go.

The other two lions left the cow. They stood alongside it and peered at their fallen comrade. They appeared to be totally baffled and they gingerly stepped back from their half-killed prey. They looked all around but saw nothing to frighten them.

The cow writhed about, trying to stand up. Its head was up and its forelegs began pulling its hindquarters along the ground. It had no chance because both of its back legs had been partly eaten.

I smacked my second bullet into the lion that was closest to me. Again, I aimed for the heart/lung area just behind the shoulder. The stricken animal jacked and jacked, with hunched back, high into the air like a bucking bronco. Then it careered backwards unsteadily, and fell over onto its side. A series of unsuccessful struggling attempts to stand up followed. But it couldn't stand up and never would again. It was finished. I knew the signs.

The third lion took off - running steadily along the jeep track that fed up the sloping far side of the basin. It quickly disappeared into the thick bush on top of the donga wall. I aimed at it carefully, waiting for it to stop. It didn't stop, so I had no chance of putting a bullet into it before it disappeared.

I had decided very early in my lion-hunting career that I would never fire a shot at a running lion - at any lion for that matter - unless I was confident the bullet would kill it. I had developed the greatest respect for these big pussy cats and I had no wish to be charged down by a lion that I had wounded. They are just too big, too ferocious and too damn dangerous to take chances with.

I was being exposed to ever increasing numbers of stock-killing lion hunts

and the law of averages told me that if I took too many chances with them, they would wreak their revenge on me sooner or later. I had already experienced the fact that a lion can effectively - figuratively speaking! - hide behind a single blade of grass; and I had long ago made up my mind that it was not a good idea to wound one.

I took off after it. That required that I run past the two stricken cats and the cow. Both the lions were dying but they were not yet dead. They were struggling to stay alive but they were well beyond the stage where they would attack me. Looking at the vacancy in their eyes I could see that they were well on their way to a happier hunting ground.

Nevertheless, it would be prudent not to get too close. If I ran within reach of a swipe, it was still possible that one of them could pull me to the ground. So I kept a careful distance as I circled round them. Once beyond them, I raced on in my pursuit of the survivor.

There was nothing I could do about the badly mauled cow. I would have to go back and dispatch it later. My priority was to get the remaining lion. Time was now of the essence. I had to find it before it regained its senses; before it headed for the horizon – back to where it had recently come from. If I had shot the cow at that stage, the sound of another shot might have urged the lion to keep on running.

I ran along the vehicle track and up the steep slope to the top. Mbuyotsi and Ben followed - Ben lagging a bit behind. He was not nearly as sprightly as was his fellow Bushman! I stopped and waited for them to catch up.

We found ourselves standing in the middle of some very heavy thorn-scrub. It was wintertime so the thicket comprised mainly dry and leafless sickle-bush; but, although leafless, the bushes still supported a myriad of heavy sharp thorns.

We wandered quietly and slowly through it, keeping to the vehicle track. Mbuyotsi and I watched for any sign of movement. Ben searched the ground for spoor. Presently the track emerged from the thicket onto the edge of wide open mopani woodland. There was no sign of the lion.

I believed that our lion - after escaping from the frightening contact we had just had with it - would not have run out into open woodland. It would have

stuck to thick bush - looking for a place where it could hide away.

Ben found several lion tracks on the road but there was nothing new. The spoor told us that the lions had walked down the vehicle track into the basin below - probably at dawn - on their way to where they had drunk water from the river. The escaping lion's tracks, therefore, were confusingly intermingled with the very slightly older spoor.

We game rangers called that state of affairs '*Yesterday's, Today's and Tomorrow's Tracks*' - which were notoriously difficult to unravel.

Where had the lion gone? It must have either veered down into the riverine forest scrub on our right hand side; or it had run off into the strip of sickle-bush thicket on our left hand side. The sickle-bush thicket ran all along the top of the donga wall.

Where to go? There was no time to waste. If I was to find this lion I had to find it fast. I knew it was still somewhere nearby - hiding. I could feel its presence. I also, however, knew that once it had gathered its wits, it would start putting distance between itself and the place where its two comrades had just been killed.

Push! Push! Push! That is what I had to do now. It was imperative that I kept on the lion's tail.

I drew a tiny ash bag from one of my shirt's breast pockets; shook it at arm's length with a quick jerk; and watched the puff of dry white wood ash drifting off on the air towards the river.

Whilst I was contemplating my options, I drew two rounds from my cartridge belt, pushed one into the magazine and the other into the breech. My rifle was now once again full!

I looked at Mbuyotsi and silently flicked my thumb to the left. I had a feeling the lion had gone into the sickle bush. The gesture was a question. The Bushman nodded. He agreed with me.

With silent hand signals I told both trackers to stay where they were. I needed to do this stalk quickly, silently and alone.

Although speed was of the essence, I couldn't proceed with too much haste,

or I would chase my already frightened quarry off.

So I picked my way slowly along the outer edge of the thicket, pushing my nose into the wind. I placed every foot carefully and quietly onto the ground. My eyes canvassed the heavy cover, everywhere, inside the thicket - which was on my left hand side. There were tall stands of yellow grass growing amongst the thorns. The thorn bushes had protected it from grazing cattle throughout the year. So the cover, for a hiding lion, was perfect. And I was quite sure that the lion *must* have known the lie of the land! I knew then that I had made the right decision - to move into the sickle bush and not go down to the river. I again sensed the presence of the lion nearby. The feeling was becoming ever more tangible. And I listened to my instincts!

The open mopani woodland was on my immediate right hand side. I ignored it. The lion would not be hiding away out there in the open.

Visually, I probed every piece of the thick bush on my left. My eyes penetrated every nook and cranny that could possibly hide a lion. Despite being so very careful, however, I nearly missed it.

I had ventured perhaps 150 yards along the edge of the thicket - from the road - and had walked right past the lion before I saw it. I had casually cast a last chance glance behind me over my left shoulder, before looking ahead and discarding the bush behind. And there it was, lying flat on its belly, beautifully camouflaged by the ubiquitous tangle of sickle bush and the yellow grass. It was watching my every move.

Except for the fact that its two yellow eyes were staring at me openly, I would have missed it. It was the symmetry of those twin golden orbs, set amidst that jumble of different shapes and colours, that caught my eye. It was facing me with its body and chin lying flat on the ground; as quiet as a mouse.

I don't believe the lion had any intention of attacking me. It wasn't lying in ambush. It was afraid and bewildered. I think that, had I not seen it, it would have held its position and let me pass by. It would then have slunk off, moving silently back towards the river, leaving me in blissful ignorance as to where it had gone.

Our eyes locked.

I stopped and quietly turned to face the lion, lifting my rifle as I moved, flicking the safety catch off with a single right thumb action. It was no more than 20 yards from me. It was well camouflaged but I had it in clear view.

The lion knew I had seen it because it gathered its feet beneath its body as a cat does before pouncing on a mouse; but I still did not believe it was about to charge me. It was preparing itself for a quick escape should that be necessary. By its actions, I was quite sure that it had never been hunted. I was also sure it was wondering: *'What the hell is going on?'*

I had the lion's measure! It was not about to rush me, neither was it quite ready to run off into the thick bush behind it. It was half curious and half afraid. I could see that it wasn't sure what to make of me but, also, that it didn't really see me as much of a threat. It just didn't know what to do next.

I took careful aim at the lion's head, resting my foresight at a point high up on the bridge of its nose, just below the line of its eyes. Gently I squeezed the trigger.

At that precise moment the lion sat up. It was a sudden precipitous movement.

It was too late to remove my finger pressure on the trigger - which was, anyway, almost a hair-trigger; and it had been depressed beyond the point of no return. The shot went off. And instead of hitting the lion between the eyes, my bullet hit it low down in the stomach.

The lion leapt high into the air - straight up - tumbling backwards as it fell to the ground; and it let out the most terrible explosion of resonant roars and grunts. In an instant it was gone, racing flat out into the thick bush behind it. I cursed loudly but there was nothing I could do about it. The unfortunate incident had taken place. Even before I had jacked another round into the breech the stricken lion was out of sight.

I took off instantly, sprinting after the rampaging lion, ducking and diving through the almost impenetrable sickle bush. I raced as fast as I could, following the continuous caterwauling of the injured cat. The spiky thorns raked over my exposed face, arms and legs. Blood flowed. I ignored it. The thorns tore at my uniform, ripping the epaulettes off the shoulders of my khaki shirt, and my green-and-gold cloth shoulder insignia flew off. I didn't

care. I had other things on my mind. More important things! More urgent things!

Up ahead, I could hear the lion, periodically, falter in its flight. The sounds I heard told me that when it stopped, it was rolling around on the ground, fighting its pain, roaring and chuntering, and trashing the bushes all around. Then it got up and raced off again on another full scale rampage.

So long as the lion continues to perform like this, I thought, I will know where it is. And, if I can get right behind it, and keep on its tail, I will be able to kill it when it has one of its roll-about stops. I had visions of meeting up with it when it was fighting the universe - and of being able to shoot it before it took off again. But that never happened.

I was so absorbed in following the rampaging lion that I had completely forgotten about the donga. I was concentrating far too much on forcing myself at breakneck speed through the heavy thicket. My focus was on the wounded lion and its chuntering roars. I did not register the fact that it was headed for the donga cliff. I don't think the lion thought about that either.

First the lion, and then I, was headed for the same disaster.

The lion raced pell-mell over the edge of the donga wall. Its legs and feet were sprawling as it tried to grab at supports in the air that simply were not there. It dropped 20 feet to the ground below, hitting the ground hard on the *upstream* side of a large tussock of pampas grass - eight feet tall and three feet wide at the base. And there the lion lay, feeling the pain of its bullet wound and nursing whatever added hurt it had incurred in the fall.

Pampas grass is an ornamental and exotic plant from South America.

It was

grown in the garden of the van Wyk home high up on the plateau rim.

A seed

must have strayed from the garden, run down the stream during a tropical storm,

and germinated there on the banks of the Shangani River three miles below the

homestead. Nothing seems to eat Pampas grass, so it is a very durable plant in

Africa. As things turned out: thank goodness for that!

I was running hard - flat out - shielding my face from the vicious thorns, when the thicket ended abruptly right in front of me. Too late, I recognised the donga wall as it passed beneath me. I, too, tried to grab at things that just weren't there. On my way down I saw the lion glaring up at me, snarling menacingly.

I thumped heavily onto the ground on the *downstream* side - the opposite side - of the same high tussock of Pampas grass that the lion was hiding behind. Only that clump of grass separated us and there was no other cover anywhere about. The grass all around had been cropped very short by the farmer's cattle.

Besides being bruised and stunned by the fall, I had hit the ground awkwardly and twisted my left knee very badly. But, somehow, I managed to hang onto the rifle.

I scrambled frantically to get away from the lion...into a position that was directly behind the tuft of grass.

The lion had watched my descent with some interest; and as my body hit the ground it leapt onto the grass - on its side of the tuft - roaring like a mad thing. And, for a second or two, the whole top canopy of the tall grass, with its plumes of soft white feathers, leant over me. Then, when the lion retreated, the grass sprang back to its former upright position.

After that display of aggression the lion backed off - but it remained right up against the far side of the Pampas. I was constantly reminded that there was no other cover to hide the lion anywhere on the flat floor of the donga. And there was none for me either.

The lion snarled and growled continuously - but it did not run away. I think it realised that I was responsible for all its pain and discomfort - and it didn't want a second dose of the same medicine. So it was happy to simply hide behind the Pampas.

The distance between us was now a mere nine feet. The lion was lying three feet back from the tuft of grass on its side of '*the divide*'; I was sitting on the ground three feet in front of '*the divide*'; '*the divide*' being the tussock of Pampas grass.

I could not see the lion but, every now and again, I saw the black tip of its ever swishing tail as it swung from side to side behind the tussock. That constantly moving tail was a worry. It told me that the big and heavily wounded cat was very agitated.

I wasn't quite sure what I should do. To begin with I scrambled backwards away from the grass, retreating one yard from the tussock. Then I realised that if I went too far back I would lose the cover that the grass provided me. So, shuffling along on my bottom, I moved back towards the tussock. And there I sat very still, and I watched the grass. And I watched the edges of the tuft, too, just in case the lion came boiling round the side.

For a long time I lay there silently - my mind a whirlpool of thoughts and ideas - half-lying on my lower back, half-sitting.

Something made me look down at the rifle in my hands. I was aghast. The bolt was gaping open. The cartridge in the chamber had been ejected during my fall. There was a glint of brass coming from inside the magazine. I rammed the bolt shut, pushing another round into the breech. The Mauser safety catch key was standing erect. That was the half-on/half-off position. I flicked it fully *off* with my thumb. The rifle was once again ready for action.

Phew... I thought. Thank God I had seen that - and had been able to rectify it before anything nasty happened.

The metallic clicking of the rifle's bolt alerted the big cat. With a loud roar it once again launched itself onto the Pampas; and again the grass tops leant over me. And once again they retreated. The lion then resumed its snarling and growling from behind its grassy screen.

I was tempted to fire a shot through the grass in the hope of hitting the lion, by chance, on the other side. But I resisted the urge. I realised that had I done so - and missed - the shot might have provoked it to attack me from around the edge of its cover. And if that had happened, it would have moved with the speed of lightning.

I had experienced several lion attacks - and I knew I would only have one chance to fire a single shot before the charging lion was all over me. And that one shot would have to be a good one or I would be quickly dead. So I could not afford to be caught with an empty rifle in my hands!

So I lay still and waited. My eyes remained forever focussed on the Pampas. And I hoped that the wound the lion had sustained would eventually sap its energies.

The lion stayed behind the grass. It continued to growl and to snarl at me, but it made no move to venture round the tussock.

I detected a weakening in its remonstrations which suggested the lion was getting tired. I wondered about that. My bullet must have done more damage than I had at first thought. Was the lion not moving, perhaps, because it *could* not move? But that was unlikely! It had seriously attacked the Pampas grass twice. Perhaps it was not keen to force a confrontation because it was in pain - intense pain - or because it was afraid. That was more like it. But... maybe its strength was leaching away and it would soon expire? I hoped that that was the case. But that was mere speculation. Had I been able to see the lion I would have been able to better judge its condition. I eventually concluded, however, that it would probably be better for me that the lion and I remained out of sight of each other.

The impasse continued. The lion lay on one side of the Pampas grass, growling and snarling at me continuously. I lay on the other side on my back, with my shoulders raised and with the rifle poking in the lion's direction. It was a tiring position that I could not maintain indefinitely. For the moment, however, I was as ready as I could possibly be, for any eventuality.

The pain in my knee was excruciating. It began to throb.

At that point, Ben and Mbuyotsi appeared on top of the donga cliff above me. They started to shout at the lion and they threw sticks at it - trying to get it to run away. It didn't! Instead, it went berserk - roaring and growling, and snarling and hissing at the intruding trackers.

"Haaaiiieee...", I remonstrated with the two men - trying not to attract too much attention to myself. That's all I needed at that moment. The cavalry riding to my rescue!

"Haaaiiieee-konah....!" I urged them. *No...! No...!* *"Hamba moovah.... fishlah wena..."* Go back. Hide away. *"Tulah..."* Keep quiet.

I did not want to say much more for fear of attracting any more of the lion's attention than I had to. Looking puzzled, the trackers disappeared into the bush behind them. But they didn't go far. I could see Mbuyotsi's face looking down on me from amongst the thicket bushes above.

The lion continued to growl and snarl. It was angry. It was in pain. And I knew it must be terrified.

I was prepared to wait out however long it took for the lion to weaken to the extent that I would be able to safely sneak backwards and away from it. That time was fast approaching. I could feel it coming. But my damaged knee was an unknown factor. I wasn't sure if it would carry my weight when I stood up. If I could safely get back just ten yards from the Pampas, I would have the leeway that I needed - if I could still walk - to sneak off to the side and to put a lethal bullet into the lion's body from a distant angle.

After my initial scare - despite the continuing danger - my nerves were settling down. I was still in trouble but my fear had gone. I was confident in the knowledge that, as long as I had a bullet up the spout, I could kill this lion if it attacked. A .375 Magnum bullet hitting a charging lion in the chest from the front - with the 300 grain slug raking back through the animal's entire

body length - would drop any attacking lion in its tracks.

These thoughts made me feel happier by the minute. All I had to do now to kill this lion was to lie still and wait out the time it would take for our circumstances to change. Let the lion make the first move - and be ready for it. If the lion moved first, it would be its first mistake. If it charged me NOW I would be ready for it. But I had a feeling that that was not going to happen. I firmly believed the lion's life was slowing expiring. Why else had it not run away?

Then, out of the blue, Andries appeared on the donga wall above me and to my left. In his hands he carried his father's old World War II .303 SMLE. He took in the situation at a glance and fired a bullet into the lion's body from where he stood.

The lion got up, hunched its shoulders, and staggered off - moaning softly to itself. Gone immediately were its roars, its growls and its snarls. It fell down, then silently rolled over and over as it tried to regain its feet. It was now well clear of the Pampas grass and in my full view. I saw that it was dying. Andries fired a second shot into it - just to make sure.

I held my hand up to Andries, indicating that what he had done was enough.

I then lay still and watched the life leaving the lion's body. I could have shot it, too, but there was no need. All the signs were as clear as a bell. Its eyes were staring vacantly at me from a distance of no more than three or four yards. Its jaw was working as if it was trying to yawn but without coordination. It lay quietly on its side. Its tail slapped the ground several times. Then it died.

Relief swamped my soul. It was, at last, all over. When I tried to get up, however, I discovered that I had a big problem. My knee simply refused to carry my weight; and it was on fire. This was the start of a knee cartilage problem that was to plague me for the next several years. It was only resolved when I had major surgery to remove the entire torn cartilage in 1965.

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I then shouted up to Andries and asked him to walk down the donga to where the stricken cow was lying; and I asked him to dispatch it.

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A sequel to the lion story.

We will be discussing various aspects of the Rhodesian tsetse fly story in other mini books, so I am not going to confuse this hunting story by trying to explain my involvement with the tsetse fly operations now. It is sufficient that you know that - between 1964 and 1968 - I was *in-charge* of the elephant and buffalo elimination campaign that was conducted in the 1500 square mile Sebungwe Tsetse Fly Corridor in the Binga district. I had been tasked by my government to eliminate all elephants and buffaloes in the Sebungwe.

Was it the right thing to do? The Rhodesian government thought so at the time. Why? To protect the national cattle herd from the scourge of the fatal disease, nagana - which the tsetse fly spreads. In retrospect, the elephants would still have disappeared because the Sebungwe corridor was shortly thereafter overrun by the Batonka tribespeople. Nowadays I doubt that even a hare exists in that whole region!

Sometime during the early months of 1965, I was advised by the senior tsetse fly field officer at Kamazeo - the Tsetse Department's headquarters in the Sebungwe - that there was a large build up of elephants in the escarpment country just to the north of the Kamazeo station. Consequently, my trackers and I left our Land Rover at Kamazeo early one morning, and we headed north, on foot, into some of the most rugged terrain in the corridor. There was a lot of old elephant spoor about. Nothing new! We walked a long way - constantly searching - before we picked up the fresh tracks of a breeding herd of 20 in the dry Nagupande riverbed. And we set off in pursuit.

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It has just struck me that few people in the outside world - outside Africa, that is - will understand why, as a government game ranger, I was tasked with shooting elephants at all. More than that! Why I was tasked with eliminating elephants in such a huge sector of the middle Zambezi Valley.

In recent years, Westerners have been brainwashed into believing that the elephant is an endangered species - which it is not - and you must be having strange thoughts every time you read one of my elephant hunting stories. In fact - and this will give you food for thought - the concept of endangered species is based on a false premise. It is not supportable by science! So it is a fallacy! That needs an explanation, too.

Remember that this - and every other hunting story I relate - took place 50 years (and more) ago. In the 1960s, conditions and circumstances were quite different then to those pertaining today (2015) - so you must interpret these accounts in the context of their historical realities. They occurred during an era of colonial Africa that disappeared into the mists of time 35 years ago.

Nevertheless, to put your minds totally at ease, I will devote the next mini book -

Volume 9 - to explaining everything that you will need to know about the conservation (management) of elephants in Africa; and why I was tasked to hunt them the way I did. In this story, therefore, just accept the facts as I present them and don't involve yourself in what you believe are the rights and/or the wrongs of what I am doing.

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different to those pertaining today - so you must interpret these hunting accounts in the context of their historical realities. They occurred during an era of colonial Africa that disappeared into the mists of time 35 years ago. And this may surprise you, too: there are INFINITELY MORE elephants in southern Africa today - at least a thousand percent more - than there were when I was hunting elephants and buffaloes in the Sebungwe.

Nevertheless, to put your minds totally at ease, I must advise you that I have just published another book on KINDLE - entitled “ELEPHANT HUNTING” sub-titled “Facts and Fables” - in which I explain everything that you will ever want to know about the conservation (management) of elephants in Africa. It explains why stable elephant populations need to be culled annually; why, when and how excessively large elephant populations should be drastically reduced in number; and why elephant hunting is a vitally important population management tool.

It also explains, in detail, WHY the endangered species concept is a fallacy - and how its imposition on the African elephant by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (?????)(CITES) in 1989, has done immeasurable damage to the African elephant as a species. It has destroyed vast tracts of once healthy elephant habitat by reducing them to desert status. And it has caused the elimination of huge elements of biological diversity in the national parks where excessive elephant populations now live - causing the progressive local extinction of many species of plants and animals.

After reading all this, you will come to understand that elephant hunting is fully justified.

In this story, therefore, just accept the facts as I present them and don't involve yourself in what you believe are the rights and/or the wrongs of what I am doing. The new “ELEPHANT HUNTING” mini-book will completely satisfy your curiosity.

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That day, Mbuyotsi carried the station's .423 Westley Richards rifle and one josak (canvas water bag). Our second josak had developed a leak so we had left it at our base camp at Chebira Springs - about 20 miles north-east of Kamazeo. I did not like going into that kind of country with only one josak to share between the three of us - but we had no choice in the matter. I knew, from the very beginning, however, that lack of water was going to plague us that day. And it did.

The tracks led us southwest into the Manyande River country. There on the sloping banks of the dry river course, the elephants had lain down and slept for several hours during the night.

All elephants lie down on their sides every night and they go into a very deep sleep. They normally seek out sloping ground to sleep upon.

When they woke up, the elephants walked upstream along the Manyande drainage, due south, passing not too far from Chief Pashu's village.

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Pashu is where the Matabele king, Lobengula, took poison and died whilst fleeing from the Rhodesian white settler forces during the Matabele War of 1893. His remains and his wagons are buried in a large cave amongst the broken hills. This was the closest I ever got to Lobengula's grave. I have always regretted not having made the effort to visit the site during my five years at Binga. This was an unfortunate error of judgement because my good friend, the District Commission, Ian Findlay, knew exactly where it was located.

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Just before they reached the plateau rim at Siambola, the elephants turned northeast and headed for the hills north of Kamazeo. They had come full circle. We were back to where we had started the hunt that morning.

We caught up with our elephants just before noon. It was stinking hot. The humidity levels were sky high, and the elephants (despite their sleep) had been walking hard most of the previous night, and all that day, too. Those combined factors had probably caused them to go into a premature siesta mode.

I tested the wind. It was blowing briskly from the southeast; from our right to our left. I looked around me and absorbed the nature of the terrain. The country was very rugged. The escarpment was also very steep, sloping sharply down, through the rocks, the trees and the bushes, from our right hand side to our left. So the wind was blowing directly downhill.

The herd had split up. In front of us stood a group of eight animals and, from the soft noises I could hear, I knew that the others had settled into a position amongst the trees, on the higher ground, to our right. I could not see any of the second group but I knew exactly where they were.

All the elephants were breathing heavily, blowing air hollowly through their trunks and throwing sand onto their backs. They were flapping their ears noisily against their shoulders. They, too, were feeling the heat. I visualised all these actions from the sounds that I could hear. And all the while a light cloud of pale brown dust filtered down on the air currents from above, enveloping the eight animals that I had visual to my front. All this restless activity informed me that they had only just settled down for their midday rest.

I weighed my options. It was my job to shoot all 20 of these elephants, but which unit should I tackle first? There were clearly more elephants in the group above me, so I contemplated moving up the slope and to shoot them first. I had a feeling that, in this rough terrain, it was going to be difficult to

account for them all in my first assault, but I wanted to shoot as many as possible on the first attempt.

What to do? I took a long swig at the josak nipple. The water bag was nearly empty! I passed it on to the trackers who each took a mouthful of its cool clear water. It had been a hard, hot hunt, and we didn't know what the rest of the day had in store for us.

We were standing on an ancient elephant path that, over many centuries of use, had been cut like a sloping terrace into the hillside. The path was the only even bit of ground in the vicinity. Getting within very close range of the elephants in front of us, therefore, was going to be easy. And I was confident that I could down all eight animals in a very short space of time. But what would happen next? What would the upper group then do?

There was no doubt that once the shooting started the others would take flight. I was fairly sure, however, that they would not head uphill. That would have been suicidal. Elephants cannot climb steep hills speedily! I could outrun most elephants on an uphill race. So I would have easily outstripped them - as they slowly laboured up the hill - and I would have taken them all out, one by one, at my leisure. They would not run along the hillside either; there were too many rocks on the slopes to make a sideways getaway a feasible choice.

But I knew what they would do! They would come barrelling downhill - hoping to join up with the lower group before racing, together, into the flatter Nagupande River basin below us. *If that happened that would be fine by me*, I thought. I would rather the elephants came to me - resulting in a quick kill - than I spend the rest of the day looking all over the Sebungwe for the ones that had run away.

I made a silent gesture to both trackers indicating that I was first going to tackle the eight animals that were directly in front of us. Mbuyotsi nodded. Ben shook his head. He took my wristwatch from the coin pocket in his short trousers - where he always kept it. When hunting, I rarely wore it on my wrist. He showed me the time and he shook his head.

“Wait one hour,” he cautioned me. *“Wait until they are all asleep.”* He looked at Mbuyotsi for approval. Mbuyotsi smiled and nodded.

It was sound advice. It was a tactic that we used all the time. Stall the pulling of the triggers until all the elephants were dozing in heat of the day!

We moved a little back from our target group and settled down to wait, with our bums on the ground and our backs against tree trunks. And we watched our eight elephants as they settled down in the shade of a big Mountain Acacia tree. Slowly they submerged into their soporific, midday siesta mode.

When the elephants in front of us had properly settled - and when the silence of the group above us was complete - I motioned to Ben that it was time. He nodded and withdrew a full packet of ammunition from his shirt pocket. He took two brass shells out of the box as he rose to his feet, and prepared himself to feed me with cartridges during the killing frenzy that was about to take place. He knew the ropes.

I could shoot faster and more accurately with Ben feeding me ammunition by hand - two cartridges at a time - than I could do by pulling shells from my own cartridge belt myself. It was team work that brought us the quick and exemplary success for which our hunting team was renowned.

The wind remained constant. I moved in quietly and got to within eight yards of the nearest elephant without being seen. The slope and the rocks, however, were such that Ben was unable to walk alongside me. Instead, he followed directly behind me, ready at a moment's notice to jump into a position on my right hand side once I started shooting. Mbuyotsi took up the rear.

It was not Mbuyotsi's job to involve himself with the shooting. He could shoot quite well - one heart-shot elephant at a time - but he was nowhere close to the hunting standard of which I approved. There was only one

perfect shot to kill an elephant in my book - the brain-shot - and Mbuyotsi was NOT up to that very demanding speciality. So he carried the loaded spare rifle - ready to hand it to me should I need it in a hurry.

In more than twenty years Ben never fired a hunting rifle in my presence. He was an excellent tracker and was otherwise quite content to perform as my *wingman*, feeding me a constant supply of ammunition during and throughout the shooting war that we regularly waged with big herds of elephants.

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It took me 15 seconds, twenty at the most, to knock down the eight animals in front of me. By then the second group was running pell-mell down the slope towards us. The speed at which they closed the gap surprised me. I had no time to do anything but react.

I spun round to face the wall of stampeding elephants that bore down on us. The lead animal was a big cow, the matriarch. My rifle was at my shoulder. My sights were on its brain. On the steep slope, however, my wobbly legs were not holding my body square and steady. And I was holding my rifle at an angle upwards of nearly 45 degrees.

The elephant was very close and getting closer by the second. Furthermore, by then, it had seen me and had dropped its head to attack.

My stance was very awkward and insecure. Nevertheless, I had the cow's brain in my sights. I squeezed the trigger.

The recoil punched my body backwards. Unbalanced for a second, my left leg dropped back onto the sloping ground behind me, countering the recoil. I felt my ankle *turning* as a rock beneath my foot loosened in the ground. All my weight had now transferred to my very insecure left foot.

My mind was filled with three things. Firstly, watching the hanging carcass of the fast approaching dead elephant cow that towered above me - wondering if it would fall on top of me. Secondly, the vital need to keep on

my feet no matter what, and to place them correctly on the ground for my next vital shot! (A whole herd of elephants, remember, were running towards me behind the now dead matriarch.) And, thirdly, the equally important need to ram another round from the magazine into the breech.

Above all, I needed to transfer my body weight from my left foot, back onto my right foot, and to bring my left foot forward. In the awkward position I was standing, I could not possibly fire another bullet at the elephants that were about to overwhelm me.

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My shooting position was all wrong. My body was facing 90 degrees to the left of the advancing elephants and I was looking at them across my right shoulder.

I wrenched at my feet to get my body back to the correct firing position. At that very moment I both heard and felt a squelching, scrunching noise as my left knee buckled beneath me.

All this happened in the few split seconds after I had pulled the trigger.

I looked up at the big cow I had just shot. It was still towering over me. It seemed to have lifted itself even higher into the air and was poised directly above me, an illusion that was exaggerated by the steep slope of the hillside. The elephant was dead. I could see that. Its eyes were staring blankly into eternity - but its body was still flying through the air towards me.

On that steep hillside I could not judge where the carcass was going to fall. And there was nothing I could do about it. Everything was now well beyond my control. In a flashing instant of time, my knee gave way and I subsided awkwardly onto the ground. And from that basic ground level view, I watched helplessly as the dead elephant's enormous body went through all the motions of crashing to the ground. First, its toes caught against the rocks at its feet. Then its front legs folded beneath its chest. Its head rose upwards and forwards, thrusting the two shining white tusks to the fore.

The body hit the ground right in front of me. Then it slid progressively downhill on its brisket, until it encountered the carcass of another dead elephant to my left front. This brought the body's slide to a brief halt, but the steep incline was still a factor.

The carcass fell over, as if in slow motion, onto its left hand side. Its top hind leg then began kicking in its death throes, and that juddering action eased its rear end further down the hill. The big carcass - its back now leading the way - slid on its side straight down the hill towards me.

I was on the point of getting up to scramble away when its slithering body came to a gentle stop, with its spine mere inches from where I lay crippled on the ground.

The rest of the herd roared past us on either side, split by the heap of dead elephants lying all around us. Those on the right ran round the carcass of the big matriarch that now lay, like a protective shield, directly in front of me. Their pounding feet, one elephant after the other, passed me by within touching distance.

Then, just as suddenly as the stampede had erupted, it was over. The elephants had come and they had gone. There was a thick pall of brown dust hanging in the air all around us - above and below us. And there was the sound of splintering tree trunks and of rocks rolling down the hill as the elephants raced and stumbled in their frantic bid to escape.

No sooner had they gone than Mbuyotsi walked out from behind and below the pile of elephants. He had his rifle at the ready but had not fired a shot. A naughty smile split his face. He was seeing the funny side of everything. He was incorrigible.

Mbuyotsi stood for a moment, looking at me, shaking his head. I could read his mind: '*One of these days Mahohboh!!!!*' And, again, I knew exactly what he meant. I also knew that had I been in imminent danger of being tusked, he would have killed the elephant that was threatening me. He was

always available when I needed him! But, fortunately, his intervention this time had not been necessary.

Ben crawled out from a gap amidst the carcasses. He had dived amongst the dead bodies when matters got out of hand. So we had all lived to fight another day!

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I now found myself in exactly the same predicament I had been in with the lion on Karna Block four years previously. I lay on the ground in agony. My left knee was swelling and burning hot. And I was reluctant to move it.

The trackers helped me straighten my leg - and, temporarily, I made myself comfortable, leaning my back against the spine of the dead matriarch. I could feel the bristles of her body hair pushing into my skin through the thin shirt on my back - but their discomfort was nothing compared to the fire that was raging inside my knee.

And I thought dismally about the long haul back to Kamazeo. The hills were undulating all the way. It was not a hike you would want to write home about. With a buckled knee it was purgatory. Ben carried Mbuyotsi's weapon and Mbuyotsi helped me negotiate the very steep slopes. To get me up the hills I held my .458 Magnum by the pistol grip whilst Mbuyotsi held it by the muzzle - and he pulled me gently up the hills behind him. On the downward slopes he carried my rifle and supported me, step by step, to the bottom.

It was dark by the time we reached the plateau country above the escarpment. I then knew that if we walked southeast we would meet the game fence that surrounded the Nagupande experiment station near Kamazeo. And somewhere in between there was the jeep track that linked Kamazeo and the Siambola Tsetse Fly Gate on the southern corridor game fence.

When we hit the road, Mbuyotsi left me with Ben and he ran back to

Kamazeo to fetch my Land Rover. He then haltingly - because he was no driver - drove us back to our permanent base camp at Chebira Springs.

Three weeks later, in the Bulawayo General Hospital - I had the troublesome and by then terribly torn outer cartilage removed from my left knee.

Nowadays damaged knee cartilages are treated (repaired) using what is called *keyhole* surgery. Only the damaged part of the cartilage is excised and the entire procedure is carried out through a tiny keyhole incision.

They used a different technique in 1965. They cut the whole cartilage out which left me with a 4 inch (10 cm) scar running diagonally across the outside of my left knee. But the operation was successful.

Five weeks after the surgery, with my knee still swathed in crepe bandages, I shot my next elephant, a big bull, in the thickets at Chebira Springs.

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A sequel to the surgery!

For four months, during the dry season of 1964, I had worked with Rupert Fothergill catching black rhinos in the Sizemba area of the Binga district. Rupert received international acclaim - and a '*Member of the British Empire*' (MBE) decoration from Queen Elizabeth II - for his indefatigable five years of work leading the '*Operation Noah*' animal rescue team. During those five years, Rupert and his men saved thousands of wild animals that had been marooned on temporary islands formed - and which were quickly swamped - as Lake Kariba filled to capacity.

On the islands Rupert pioneered the capture of black rhinos using dart guns, darts (flying syringes) and potent immobilising drugs. Over the four months that we worked together that year, he taught me all he knew about rhino capture and darting.

The previous year, together, Rupert and I caught 18 rhinos and transported

them to Hwange National Park where they were released back into the wild. The operation closed down in mid-October purely because the summer rains - which were due to start in November - would have shut us down anyway. It would have been impossible to transport captured rhinos from distant locations in the bush, to the holding pens at our base camp, when the soils were a quagmire of mud; and when the streams and rivers we would have to cross to get to where the rhinos had succumbed to the drugs, would have been impassable.

Rupert and I worked well together so we planned to continue the capture operation in the dry season of 1965.

***Special Note:** Nothing in this story relates, in any way, to the WHITE RHINO, the biological and ecological circumstances of which are very different to the BLACK RHINO.*

By the end of 1964, I was obsessed about catching black rhinos. This was not *just* because we were saving the animals in the Zambezi Valley where they were being threatened by poachers - who used cruel steel cable snares to kill them, in those days, for their meat. It was also because darting black rhinos was the most thrilling, the most dangerous and the most challenging big game hunting work I had ever undertaken. And big game hunting was my passion.

During those early pioneering days, the average range at which I darted a black rhino - inside the impenetrable Zambezi Valley jesse (thicket) - was between 6 and 13 yards. You can't get much closer than that to one of Africa's most dangerous and pugnacious wild animals, and come out of repeat confrontations with them, still alive! But, the truth of the matter is, I would never have darted a single rhino unless I had been able to get that close.

The absolute maximum range of the America (CO₂ powered) Cap Chur guns that

we were using in those days - firing a heavy 12 cc dart - was 25 yards. And that was possible only when they were fired at a 45 degree angle. These were primitive and under-powered weapons. They were the very first of the pioneering dart guns that were ever used to catch black rhinos. And Rupert and I were the pioneers.

We zeroed the weapons in at 10 yards range. That required that we aim six inches below our intended dart-impact point when we fired the gun at 6 yards; and that we aimed 18 inches above the strike point at 15 yards range. So our judgement of distance inside the jesse had to be accurate if we didn't want to miss the rhino completely.

And we caught rhinos!

You had to be an exceptionally accomplished big game hunter to capture black rhinos in the manner Rupert and I did in those early years. You also had to be extremely fit; and I did not want to miss the planned 1965 capture operation because of my injured knee. So, after my cartilage operation, I worked very hard to get myself back into a state of peak physical condition before the end of winter.

Until I was able to start hunting again, I walked 10 miles along the dirt roads of the Binga ridge every day. I went nowhere in my Land Rover if my destination could be comfortably reached on foot.

For six months after the surgery, every day, I religiously visited the Binga hot springs - where the DC had constructed a small swimming pool for us residents - and I exercised my leg in the hot saline and sulphur impregnated

water. Floating in the hot water my legs were weightless. That allowed me to flex the leg muscles and to move my damaged knee joint to the maximum extent, without the muscles and the joint having to, also, contend with the weight of the leg itself. Consequently, within six months, my leg and my knee had regained most of their former strengths and flexibilities, and I was once again hunting elephants and buffaloes in Sebungwe as I had done before.

It took a long time, however, for the scar to heal. At its maximum width, the wound cut was a quarter of an inch thick (over 5 mm) and four inches (10 cms) long. For the next several years it remained a deep red-purple in colour.... slowly fading towards normal skin colour five years later.

When the time came for us to start resurrecting the rhino capture camp at Sizemba, and getting all the equipment together for the coming rhino capture season, the department dropped a bombshell. My services as an elephant and buffalo hunter in the Sebungwe could not be spared, I was told, because eliminating the threat that the tsetse fly posed to the national cattle herd was a government priority.

Consequently, I was not released from the elephant-and-buffalo eradication programme in the Sebungwe; and Rupert was told to proceed with the rhino capture operation on his own. I was devastated but there was nothing I could do about it. I simply had to knuckle down and carry out my orders without complaint.

Rupert started the capture well. Within the first month he had released four black rhinos into Hwange National Park (300 miles away to the west) and he had another four rhinos secure in the holding pens back at his camp. A young game ranger (Tommy Orford) was allocated to him - not to carry out any capture work but to help with running the camp; to take over the feeding and welfare of the captured rhinos in the stout mopani-pole holding pens; and to escort the animals that were sent to Hwange. This freed Rupert up and it allowed him to concentrate on the actual capture work.

Then tragedy struck. Rupert was very badly gored by a rhino and he was

flown out of the valley in an air force helicopter. He was lucky not to have been killed - but, he was so badly damaged that he never returned to active black rhino capture work in the field.

The department determined that '*the show must go on*' and there was nobody else in the country, except me, who knew anything about catching rhinos with a dart gun. So I was, therefore, instructed to withdraw from the Sebungwe and to take over command of the black rhino capture operation - a position that I held, every dry season, for the following seven years. I was then 26 years old.

Catching black rhinos is a young man's game. Rupert was in his fifties and, among other things he was seriously deaf - which, in my opinion, was why he was gored.

He never heard the approaching rhino that attacked him - not until it was passively sniffing the ground next to his hunting boots - which is a story I will relate at a more appropriate time in a later volume.

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Black rhinos are solitary and nocturnal animals. They spend the entire night - sometimes in very open country - browsing and drinking. They enter the thick jesse (Zambezi Valley thicket) sometime between dawn and eight o'clock in the morning. By nine o'clock they have selected their daytime retreat - always inside the heaviest jesse, hidden well away from general wildlife activities. There they submerge themselves into a very deep sleep. They wake up between three and four o'clock in the afternoon.

When they go to sleep, rhinos lie down on their briskets - as horses do - not lying on their sides! If they are disturbed, from that upright position they can burst into a full blown charge in a matter of seconds. Only when they have a dust bath, do they lie down on their sides - but not for long - as horses do! Indeed the horse and the rhino are distantly related!

When the rhinos get up in the late afternoon, they remain inside the thicket, feeding in a desultory fashion on the edible shrubbery that exists only on

anthills (*termitaria*) inside the thicket. The plant species that makes up the jesse itself - the shrub *Combretum elaeagnoides* - is not eaten by black rhinos.

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Combretum elaeagnoides grows in tufts - coppices - up to 10 feet across. The bigger stems are no thicker than my forearm - many are only as thick as my thumb - and they reach a height of 10 to 12 feet. Each clump has 20 or 30 stems reaching for the sky; and the individual clumps are 10 to 15 feet apart. The growth pattern of each coppice looks much like a bunch of long-stemmed roses when it is placed in a shallow vase with a wide top. The branches sprawl - often lying at a 45 degree angle - sometimes flatter - and the stems of one tuft find support by intertwining with the similarly sprawling branches of their neighbouring coppice. Each stem has several branches from which multiple complex twiglets sprout. The wood is smooth - there is no loose bark - and it is dove grey in colour.

One consolation: Unlike the sinanga thickets of Hwange's teak forests, there are no thorns in the jesse - just an almost impenetrable matrix of stems and twigs. It was through this jigsaw puzzle that we were required to stalk the sleeping rhino - forcing a passage in complete and utter silence. And the snapping of only one twig was enough to alert a conditioned rhino to our presence.

During the dry season there are no leaves on the jesse, so sunlight penetrates to the ground. The light factor, therefore, is always bright and whatever shade there is, it is light and dappled. Occasionally, small jackal-berry trees (*Diosperos kirkii*) occur - which provide small patches of total shade. These are much sought after by the rhino and wherever these small trees occur there are sand wallows beneath them.

Contrasting with, and giving life to the bleak and sombre greyness of the jesse, the carpets of dead leaves on the ground - sometimes 4 inches (10 cms) thick - are dark brown, light brown, yellow and russet-red in colour.

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The rhinos feed outside the jesse in the late afternoon - all along its edge - always within easy distance of their diurnal retreats. Only at dusk do they start their individual nocturnal adventures. Their first objective is a visit to their favourite waterhole - normally before nine o'clock. Later they move into the more open zones of their home ranges because that is where they find the bulk of the food that they eat.

So black rhinos, in the Zambezi Valley, use jesse thicket primarily for security. Here, during daylight hours, when they are most vulnerable - when they are in a deep and imperative sleep - the thicket provides them with seclusion and protection from their enemies.

But there are other factors that contribute to their security.

The jesse, when in heavy summer leaf, is one of the most terrifying vegetation types in which to hunt dangerous big game animals - because then visibility within it drops to zero. It is then, also, impossible to negotiate silently, and big game animals - like elephants, buffaloes, black rhinos and lions - can hear you coming from a mile away. And, if you push them, they will wait for you to walk right onto them before they charge you at very close quarters. Fortunately, we never capture-hunted black rhinos in the jesse when it was in full leaf.

We hunted them in the winter months, and during the very hot dry season, when all the summer leaves had been shed leaving the jesse grey and naked. You were then often able to see a sleeping rhino from a hundred yards range or more. Although naked in the dry season, the thicket was still an impenetrable tangle of stems, branches and twiglets through which it was impossible to fire a dart. Darting was only possible when you could find a completely clear opening between the matrix - and that only happened when you were at very close range. That was the reason why our dart-firing ranges were so short.

We could also not fire our relatively slow-moving missiles from a greater distance because all it needed to deflect the passage of a flying dart was the touch of single twig.

Another problem was the fact that, although we could often see the rhino quite clearly from a distance of 100 yards, if it heard our approach, and if it lifted its head and looked in our direction, it would see us, too. Like the rhino we also had no cover in the leafless jesse!

The black rhino's sense of smell and hearing are extremely acute but its vision, during the day, is poor - relative, that is, to the extremely good vision of (say) a buffalo - but rhinos are capable of seeing anything that moves within 35 yards range.

Let us put this into another perspective. You have to understand that everything inside the naked dry-season jesse - which often extends for many hundreds of yards in every direction - is a picture of absolute stillness. There are few wild birds or animals and the wind currents are normally too subtle to stir even a single dried leaf on the ground. So if the rhino hears something, and lifts its head to look around, anything that moves draws its attention.

Therefore, if you wake a sleeping rhino in the jesse, and cause it to lift its head and look around, the *only* way to avoid detection is to stand perfectly still. And you may have to remain immobile for half-an-hour or more whilst the rhino waits to see if you will move again. This more often than not happens when you are within 10 yards! When a rhino has *seen* movement, it takes a lot of patience - and a lot of time standing motionless - before it will lose interest and look the other way.

Absolute immobility is, therefore, another one of the hunter's essential defences.

During our rhino capture season, leaf litter on the floor of the jesse presented yet another problem. The dead leaves are then crisp and dry, and lie on the ground in heavy carpets - where each year's new leaf fall is added to that of many yesteryears. Moving through the jesse, therefore, can be likened to walking across your kitchen floor when it is strewn with crisp post toasties (corn flakes). You can't do it silently!

There was yet another factor.....! Nobody can say that capture-hunting the black rhino was not interesting!

No matter how a rhino enters the jesse, when it reaches its chosen sleeping site - the exact place where it intends to lie down and go to sleep - it stands perfectly still for very long moments, assessing the direction of the wind. On days which appear to be windless, there is always a minuscule of air drift - which the rhino will detect. It then lies down with its rear end facing directly into the wind.

This orientation gives the rhino two advantages. If a hunter approaches it from behind, it will be alerted by the man's scent. If he comes at it from the front, the rhino's twin parabolic audio-receptors - its ears - will hear him. And he will be approaching the rhino at its sharp end, too - facing its formidable horns. So the rhino's orientation when it is asleep enables it to use its two most acute defensive mechanisms - its keen sense of smell and its finely tuned sense of hearing - to best advantage.

Whoever said the rhino was a blundering *stupid* fool? Not me!

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The goal, to get within darting range of a sleeping rhino in the jesse, therefore, always seemed to be unattainable when the circumstances were first observed. But where there is a will there is a way! Nothing is impossible!

Within the jesse, the atmosphere is a closed-circuit environment that is constantly, and unevenly, being warmed by the sun. The air is hottest where bare ground is directly exposed to the sun; it is warm in areas where there are dead leaves lying in open sunlight; it is slightly cooler where the leaves are lying in mottled shade; and it is coolest wherever there is total shade. When the air seems to be standing perfectly still there are actually countless miniature ground-level air currents at play all the time. As the warmer patches of air rise, so the (heavier) cooler air moves over the ground to replace it. On a hot day this happens all the time. And those tiny subtleties

of high and low pressure swirl around in every direction.

Even so, the best weathercock remains the rhino. Its orientation always indicates the direction of the most consistent wind drift. In theory, the general flow of the wind should negate the importance of all minor air movements at ground level because, whatever they are, and no matter how complicated they may be, the wind drift should shift them all directly away from the rhino's nose. But when there is truly no wind at all, those minor air currents - when you are up close and personal with the rhino - can mean the difference between your life and death.

The trackers likened these midday mini-wind currents to a man stirring his tea with a spoon; and they would often mimic that action when describing what the breeze was doing. The eddies at ground level inside the jesse were always an enigma; they were always a worry; and they always represented a significant risk. They were most problematical at midday - when temperatures were highest. That was when most rhinos were in their deepest sleep. And that was when I preferred to dart them. When darting rhinos in the jesse, therefore, we very rarely had everything going in our favour!

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In 1964/65 Rupert was a comparatively old man in his middle 50s. He had slowed down significantly and was no longer as active as he used to be. I was less than half his age so there was no comparison between what he could achieve - physically - and what I could achieve. Nevertheless, he succeeded where others would have failed because he had vast big game hunting experience which he used to maximum advantage. And he had a very wise head on his shoulders!

During the 1964 capture campaign he and I were a proficient team - each using, for the common good, our respective strong points. And I picked his brains continuously and unscrupulously. We were more like father-and-son than boss-and-underling. And, together, we consistently brought the rhino's in!

At first neither of us knew what to expect from the Sizemba capture. True, Rupert had gained experience catching rhinos on the Kariba islands, but conditions there were not natural. The rhino were confined by surrounding water and all Rupert had to do was to dart them. Just as well, because he was able to accrue great knowledge of the drugs that we used and about the rhino's reactions to them; and that held us in very good stead at Sizemba.

Sizemba, however, was a whole new ball game - even to Rupert. We had to learn how to hunt black rhinos under completely natural conditions; and, at Sizemba, they had no restrictions with respect to their movements. They could escape to the horizon and beyond, if they had a mind to do so - and neither Rupert nor I knew anything about hunting them. We started the Sizemba capture operation in 1964, therefore, with exactly the same hunting credentials - both of us realising that we had an awful lot to learn about our quarry.

We started darting rhinos whenever and wherever we could find them - which was mostly inside the jesse. Rupert, then, did all the darting. At first the rhinos were unafraid. When they heard us shuffling through the leaves they appeared, inquisitively, to want to know what was going on. They rarely ran away - and when they did, they didn't run very far. Darting them in the beginning, therefore, was much easier than it later became - when they started to realise that we were physically hunting them. It was then that our understanding of their daily routines and behaviour patterns became a critical factor in our success.

We started our new campaign by picking up the rhinos' spoor at the waterholes - as we were wont to do when hunting elephants and buffaloes. That meant the spoor was already 12 hours old when we started tracking; and the rhinos were then only on the first stage of their nocturnal routines. And we followed them, recording their movements throughout the night. We only reached the rhinos' early morning point of entry to the jesse in the afternoon, by which time they had completed their siesta.

The later in the day we found the rhinos, the more disinclined were we to try to dart them - because of the time factor. After darting - using our early drug

regimes - the rhinos ran off, and kept on running for 30 minutes before they succumbed to the narcotics. And it sometimes took us two hours or more to find them - even with expert trackers like Ben and Mbuyotsi; and Rupert's Shona trackers. We were always concerned, therefore, that due to some unprecedented hitch we would not find the rhino we had darted before nightfall. And neither Rupert nor I wished to leave a comatose rhino to the tender mercies of Sizemba's ubiquitous hyenas during the night.

So we had to come up with a better solution.

Following the rhinos after they had drunk the previous evening, however, had not been a waste of time. After every occasion we chalked up a greater knowledge about their routines. But for several weeks we didn't catch very many. We had to do better!

My notes told me that the rhinos fed, and wandered about in the open, all night long; and that they spent the days sleeping in the thickets. We had not known that about black rhino behaviour before. So we were beginning to understand our quarry.

My notes also told me that the rhinos entered the thickets sometime between dawn and eight o'clock in the morning; and that before then they were feeding out in the open. So, for about two hours in the early morning, there was a good chance we would come across them in open habitat. This was an epiphany; and it opened up a window of new hunting opportunities for us.

I put my ideas to Rupert and he immediately realised the opportunities. So we stopped hunting the rhinos in the conventional manner - which was as we had hunted every other species of big game animal - and we began to seek them out early in the morning.

The black rhino is a *stick-eater*. Calling it a *browser* - an animal that eats the leaves of trees - is not, therefore, an apt description! They were more than that - much more. Black rhinos are specialist feeders - unlike any other animal!

Elephants will chew on the ripped off branches of a tree to remove the bark - which bark they then grind up with their heavy molars and swallow. Once the bark is off they discard the woody part of the branch altogether. They also eat voluminous quantities of green leaves and green grass during the rains. In fact, elephants prefer to eat green grass than anything else - which makes them preferential grazers.

A black rhino, on the other hand, will cut off the small branch of a tree - as thick as my thumb - with its molars. It then crunches it - wood and all - into tiny pieces; and it swallows the whole caboodle. What nutrients it gains by doing this I have no idea but, in its dung, the tiny wood chips are excreted in the same apparent form as they were ingested. This is an easy way to differentiate between the dung of a black rhino and that of a white rhino - because the white rhino is purely a grazer. And elephant dung, also, does not contain wood chips.

Black rhinos are *clean* feeders. They will snip off a branch - even a fairly long one - and they will eat it all leaving nothing on the ground behind them. The *cut* on the parent plant - where the branch was snipped off - looks as though it was severed with a pair of sharp secateurs.

Elephants drop leaves, broken sticks and branches stripped of their bark, on the ground behind them - in large quantities - wherever they stop to feed. They are by comparison, therefore, very messy feeders.

The important thing about black rhinos, however, is that when they masticate their branches, you can hear the clear '*crummp... crummp... crummping*' of their chewing from a long way off. In the early morning - when the rest of nature is relatively silent and the air is still - you can hear black rhinos feeding from a distance of 200 yards and more.

So it was, therefore, that we began walking into the wind along the edges of favourite rhino thickets at the crack of dawn, listening for their feeding sounds. And when we heard them, Rupert would sneak up to them and get a dart into their thick hides whilst they were busy with their breakfasts. So successful was he, and in acknowledgement of this, MY idea, he allowed me

to start darting rhinos, too.

At that stage in my career, I was greatly experienced in elephant, buffalo, lion and leopard hunting but my knowledge of black rhino capture-hunting was limited to what Rupert had taught me. But, as you will gather, my contribution to the capture-hunts was significant - and constantly improving. I had a well-tuned hunter's mind and it was starting to make a difference to our capture-success rate. The figures tell it all: In 1964 - my first year catching rhinos - I caught 10 of the 18 rhinos that went to Hwange.

The easy-picking hunting - such as the one or two opportunistic dartings that fell into our laps - and the hunting of post dawn feeding rhinos out in the open - soon petered out. The important statistic, however, was that, for every rhino that we caught, we probably made contact with 15 or 20 others that ran away. Consequently, those that we failed to capture learned quickly that we were hunting them; and we constantly had to change our tactics.

We were regularly finding rhinos sleeping inside the jesse during the day but we rarely succeeded in getting close enough to dart them. They heard us, or smelt us, or saw us, and they ran away. Soon they went galloping off before they had even confirmed what it was that had disturbed them. So, as 1964 progressed, we found it increasingly more difficult to get anywhere near our required darting range; that is, within 10 to 15 yards.

My mind, therefore, began to boil over with new ideas.

When we found a rhino sleeping at 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning, I realised I held one advantage. I had nearly the whole day to stalk it. There was no need to hurry. I had until three or four o'clock in the afternoon to close the gap. All I had to do was to work out a feasible plan of action.

Now began the most interesting, most dangerous and most ingenious period of my entire big game hunting career. First of all, it required more guts than I thought I possessed. It also required that I apply greater hunting skills than any that I had used before. And it required that I carry out the last 100 yards of the stalk entirely on my own. There was no room for a back-up game

ranger with a big game rifle in his hands.

The next time we found a rhino sleeping, therefore, I instructed everybody to stay downwind, to sit down and to remain absolutely silent.

I had made up my mind that I was going to do this *thing* that I had conjured up; and that I could only do it alone. So the stage was set for a number of the most remarkable big game hunts that have ever taken place in Africa - probably ANYWHERE!

First of all, I had to take control of my mind. I discarded all negative thoughts; and determined to entertain only positive ones. I reined my nerves in. I told myself that I now knew the black rhino. I knew how it functioned. I knew how it reacted to different stimuli - and I believed I could better it. So, mentally programmed, I set about my task.

I was armed with a primitive dart gun containing but one dart. The narcotic took 30 minutes to *work*. After I had darted it, therefore, the rhino had a lot of time to *work me over* if it so wished. I chose to have had no back up. Why? Because two people make twice as much noise as does one; and because two people (moving or immobile) were easier to see in the jesse than was one! My priority was not to save my own skin but to get a dart *in*.

I took a long drink from the Josak. God alone knew when I would get my next drink of water. And it would be hot out there. I would be sweating like a pig. I was under no illusion: at the conclusion of today's hunt I would be dangerously dehydrated. Long before it was over my tongue would be feeling like a wad of dry cotton wool in my mouth.

I went into the jesse that morning with my nerves under control and with total confidence in myself. I knew I could do this. I went in telling myself that I could dart this rhino.

I took a long look at my target which was lying asleep 100 yards away in front of me. It was in full view and in relatively open thicket. What were not so obvious were all the invisible obstructive cover factors that the dry-season

jesse provided.

How was I going to do this? When I set out, I only had a vague idea.

I kept telling myself that I had several hours of grace in my favour. The rhino would be sleeping in that position for the next four or five hours. I had all the time in the world to manufacture my miracle. And I had no intention of not performing it.

Mentally I mapped a rough route to the rhino, from where I was standing to a position obliquely downwind of its resting place. I used its body as my windsock, but I also had my ash bag to check the ground-surface wind swirls as I closed with my quarry.

All the rules suggested that I approach the animal head on - closing the gap with my nose directly into the wind. That would have been fine had I wanted to kill this rhino - but that was not my intention. Capture-hunting had to be addressed in a different way. Had I approached the animal head-on I might have got myself within easy range of a dart - but with nothing to shoot at except its head and its horns! Every other part of the rhino's body would be lying directly behind those two formidable weapons.

I had to have a target with a lot of muscle - with a good blood supply to absorb the drug. So I decided to approach the rhino towards its exposed right shoulder - a large and muscular target. The shoulder, in fact, is the biggest target on a rhino.

I, first of all, moved in as close as I could without making too much noise as my feet gingerly stepped on the carpet of leaves. I hadn't gone 10 feet, however, before I realised that strategy was far too noisy. I would have to start from the very first steps with the plan that I had conceived. I had gone over it again and again as I had lain in bed every night over the last week! It was going to be laborious but I believed it was the only solution.

I squatted down and cleared all the leaves from the position that my first footfall would occupy; then I stood up and placed my right foot into the bare

space I had created. I squatted down again, and I set about lifting dead leaves from the location of my next footfall. I stood up again and my left foot also found a silent home. And so I progressed.

The constant squatting, standing, and manoeuvring was very tiring. Ten footprints later, I wondered if I had, perhaps, bitten off more than I could chew. The procedure was sapping my energies quickly and seriously. I had only just started and my back was already aching! I began to doubt that I had the stamina to keep up such an exhausting procedure. I had 100 yards to go! Then I felt humiliated by the fact that I was - so early in my approach - contemplating giving up the task. So I switched my mind off to my own undermining thoughts; and I re-focussed my determination until I was back into success-mode.

One hour passed into two - then three. And I realised I was winning. I did not feel any less exhausted but I was achieving my objective, and that raised my spirits. I was getting closer to the rhino and it hadn't moved an inch. I could now see - from the shape and thickness of its horns - that my target was an adult bull.

I began watching the rhino just as carefully as I was lifting the dead leaves and laying them to one side. And the closer I got to it, the more was I able to refine my route to the target. I took advantage of every thicker than normal clump of jesse between me and the rhino's head. Every now and again, I so slowly rose to my feet and stretched my cramped and aching muscles. My back was on fire - with all the bending and the manoeuvring I had been doing in a squatting position. I could feel cramps developing in my calves. This was definitely not a job for the elderly or faint-hearted.

The rhino remained supine - motionless. Its ears, like parabolic reflectors, independent of each other - like a chameleon's eyes - moved backwards and forwards all the time. First the right ear turned to take in the minuscule sounds it was detecting from behind, whilst the left ear concentrated on the front. Then both ears were tuned to the front. Next the left ear turned back. Then both ears were facing back. And so it went on - never ending movement! So, despite the fact the rhino was sound asleep, its audio

receptors were constantly active.

Its chin propped up the rhino's head and it blew out a heavy puff of breath through its nostrils - close to the ground. A small cloud of dust and sand blew up in front of its face but the animal remained, otherwise, quite still. I was absolutely sure, nevertheless, that its olfactory sensors were also on full alert.

The rhino may have been physically asleep, therefore, but from a protection-sensory point of view it was wide awake. I was under no illusions. Its eyes remained shut so it wasn't *seeing* what was going on in the world around it. I was content that, so far, everything was going according to my plan.

I looked back and was amused to see how clearly the route that I had taken was marked by the meandering trail of round spaces in the leaf litter. I looked towards the rhino - still sound asleep in its dust wallow. I guessed the range to be about 15 yards. Five yards ahead of me lay the last clump of jesse. Once I reached that point, I was assured of a clear shot at that massive shoulder.

I was so near - yet still so far! I began to get excited. I was nearly home and dry.

I looked around at the paucity of climbable trees. There were a few skeletal and leafless Commiphoras amongst the jesse. Trees that had smooth white bark. Albinos! They always reminded me of balsa wood so flimsy was their timber. But that didn't matter. All I had to do was to get six feet off the ground into the branches of one of them, and I would be safe from any rhino. Rhinos, unlike elephants, don't challenge trees.

These were all frivolous thoughts because I knew that if the rhino had a serious go at me I would never be able to outrun it. The few Commiphora trees that I could see were much too far away to do me any good. My legs, anyway, were aching and about to seize up. I doubted they were capable of walking let alone running.

I would be much better off, I thought, just standing still - or lying on the

ground playing possum - than trying to run off. The rhino would chase anything that was moving - and it would ignore everything that wasn't. At least I hoped so!

Almost exactly four hours since the time I had set off, I reached the last of the jesse coppices between me and the rhino. I watched its eyes blinking as the fluttering eyelids tried to dislodge the rows of mopani flies (Africa's tiny stingless bees) that were sucking up its running tears. The rhino was oblivious to everything else.

I leant out from the intervening jesse and a clear avenue opened up to me through the branches. It gave me an uninterrupted view of the rhino's huge grey shoulder which was only 10 yards from the end of the Cap Chur gun barrel. I had finally reached my goal, and without any further thought, I aimed at the big muscle at the back of the shoulder bone and squeezed the trigger.

There was a soft *phlantt* sound as the rifle spat out the silver dart. I froze and watched it flying through the air - its red pom-pom woollen tail piece, flashing its bright colour behind the silver tube. SMACK! It hit the rhino on target - and it stuck fast. The needle was barbed so the dart was held in position until all the drug had been injected.

The rhino erupted with a loud *WHOOOOSH* and with repetitive angry snorts - '*phussss... phusss... phusss...*' - it raced off into the jesse ahead of it, with its feet pounding the earth. With every front hoof beat a new *phusss* sound exploded from its nostrils. It made no attempt to look around to see from where the dart had come. It simply galloped off through the jesse, with its horns sweeping the ground in front of it.

After I pulled the trigger I didn't move. I remained frozen with the rifle still at my shoulder - watching the rhino's reaction with not a little anxiety. It would have been looking for movement, and I did not oblige. So it ran away into the jesse with the dart sticking out from its heavy shoulder muscle; and watched it go with a light and happy heart.

When it had disappeared I lay on the ground amongst the multi-coloured dry leaves and I stretched my body out luxuriously. Whew.... I was beyond being tired! I waited, in the mottled shade of the jesse, for Rupert, the trackers and the rest of the hunting party to join me; 10 men in all.

It took us an hour to find that rhino and another two to get it into the holding pens back in camp.

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Rupert never attempted this kind of very strenuous hunting. It would have been too much for his aging muscles to endure. So he continued darting the ever fewer rhinos that he could find outside the jesse in the very early mornings; whilst I perfected my own techniques of catching them inside the thickets.

It was strenuous and very dangerous work but incredibly exciting, too. Catching black rhinos was THE most inspiring big game hunting I ever practiced. It required the application of every nuance of each and every big game hunting skill that I had ever acquired; and it both improved upon them and honed them to a state of excellence that is rarely, if ever, acquired today.

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In this volume, I have exposed you to a great deal of the background associated with the capture-hunting of black rhinos in the Zambezi Valley jesse. All this took place 50 years ago. It was real pioneering work! Now - in future volumes - I can relate to you some of the interesting hunting adventures that we carried out during these operations –in the knowledge that you understand WHY we did what we did.

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And now I can finish the saga of my knee cartilage!

After Rupert's goring, and after I had taken over the leadership of the black rhino capture team in 1965, I carried out several very similar inside-the-jesse hunts that I have just described. In all cases, it took me three to four hours to

get within darting range; and, in the process, I picked up and moved thousands upon thousands of dead sticks and leaves to create the bare foot-patches that I needed to make silent progress. On every occasion the enormous physical and mental effort exhausted me.

Nevertheless, in most cases the hunt went off without a hitch. Occasionally I was forced to climb a tree to save my skin. In many instances, just before I fired my dart, the rhino detected my presence and ran away. And the more rhinos I disturbed and did not catch, the more did they expect my arrival during their siesta periods in the days and weeks that followed. So, even this new method of hunting soon presented me with problems. The rhinos were very quick to learn.

On one occasion I had succeeded in getting very close to my quarry without detection. Less than 10 paces separated me from the sleeping rhino. I watched it's every movement just as assiduously as I was manufacturing my roadway through the leaves towards it. Its eyes were shut. Dribbles of white mucus ran down from their corners and swarms of mopani flies hovered around the rhino's head. They were lined up on its eyelids sucking up its tears.

I could see tsetse flies buzzing around the rhino's body. They were on its face, its neck, its shoulder and on its rib-cage - not in great numbers but enough to be a pest.

They were biting me too - prolonged, hot, burning bites that were difficult to ignore but I was in no position to retaliate. Most bites were on my back, through my thin cotton khaki shirt. I had no option but to grin and bear them.

I was within darting range, with one small coppice of jesse obscuring my target. This time I had decided on the animal's thick neck because there were several twigs in front of its bulging shoulder. The neck was a good target. It was very large and had good muscle to absorb the narcotic.

One pace forward and two steps to the left - and I could let the dart fly.

Just as I was shifting from one foot to the other - not squatting but standing crouched over - the rhino's head shot up off the ground. I froze. Then I gently lifted my face to see it better. I screwed up my eyes - like an owl does during the day - so as not to provide the rhino with such obvious and identifiable targets. I have often discovered a hiding animal just because I recognised the symmetry of its two eyes looking at me. Look at how I found the hiding lion on Karna Block - in the story told in the first part of this mini-book!

The rhino was looking directly at me. There was no doubt, therefore, that it had seen me move.

As precipitously as it had lifted its head, the rhino then suddenly scrambled to its feet; and it spun its body round to face me. I was frozen in a very awkward position but I dared not move. I watched the rhino assessing me. It dropped its head and, with its front horn lying parallel to the ground, it swept the weapon very slowly back and forth as it peered at me from only 10 yards range.

To say that I was unafraid would be a lie. I was shocked rigid and quaking like a jelly right down to the foundations of my soul. But I had my fear under control. My mind took over and I told myself, continuously, that the only thing I could do now was to stand perfectly still. The rhino had neither heard me nor smelt me. It obviously knew WHERE I was but, I reasoned, it could not know WHAT I was.

I came to believe that if I could maintain my immobility the rhino might see me as a tree stump, or as a dead bush, from which a bird had just flown. I tried to will the big pachyderm into believing that it was a silent, flying bird that it had seen. And to succeed with that subterfuge I dared not make another move. One more move and the rhino would charge. Of that I had no doubt. The remaining rhinos at Sizemba were becoming ever more agitated, and the big dominant bulls were getting more and more belligerent. The hunting conditions, therefore, were becoming increasingly more dangerous.

We were at an impasse. I dared not move and the rhino would not move -

until it had fully satisfied itself that the moving object it had seen was innocuous. And that could take ages!

After a short while, the rhino's head stopped swaying. Its front horn, however, remained low down and parallel with the ground – menacing! And its staring, wide-open eyes continued to assess me from top to toe. I remained still - like a pillar of salt. And we stood like that - the big rhino bull and me - staring at each other without moving. All I could hope for was that it would lose interest and wander away. It might equally well get curious, however, and come over to inspect me up close and personal. If that happened I had no idea what I would do.

Then I felt the burning pain. My damaged knee was again on fire. I was in the right position - buckled over as I was - to look down at the scar and was astonished to see a row of tsetse flies lined up on the livid purple wound. That scar - or the colour of it - had attracted them like bees to a honey pot. They looked like vehicles at a filling station queuing up for fuel. I tried counting them. It was difficult because they were coming and going. New flies would arrive with flat abdomens; and a minute or so later, with bellies distended like fat bumble bees - red with my blood inside them - they would take off like heavily laden air force bomber planes setting out on a mission to annihilate the enemy.

There was nothing I could do except to remain absolutely still and tolerate the burning discomfort of the bites.

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Tsetse flies are about half an inch long (1 cm). They are light brown in colour and, when at rest, they fold their wings one on top of the other - a distinctive characteristic. They live on animal blood - including human blood. When empty, the tsetse's abdomen is flat. When full it is distended, like a fat balloon, and you can readily see the red blood through the stomach wall. Each fly, at one

*sitting,
will suck into their tummies, through a well developed proboscis, close to one
cubic
centimetre of blood.*

*They fly very fast and are tough to kill, yet when they settle on your skin they
land softly - like gossamer. To begin with their bite is not detectable but the
longer it lasts the hotter and more painful it becomes. Many people react
badly to tsetse fly bites, the site swelling to the size of a pigeon's egg. They
never affected me like that!*

*Around game animals in the hot summer months, tsetse's swarm like small
but
silent flocks of bees. They transmit fatal diseases to both sensitive humans
(sleeping sickness) and unsalted animals (nagana).*

XXXXX

After 10 minutes of silent standoff, there was a subtle change in the rhino's demeanour. It lifted its head and cast its face to its left (my right). Its ears, like a pair of Victorian hearing horns, focused together on the distant jesse. Something else had attracted its attention... something more interesting and tangible than the silent and now immobile effigy that had first alerted it.

What could it be? A troop of impala walking through the jesse? Or was it a pair of young warthogs sparring with each other as they ran along? I had no idea. Whatever it was, it was on my side! So, now equally distracted, I strained my ears and listened, too.

Something was shuffling along through the litter of dry leaves about 100 yards away off to my right. The rhino's head was now fully up and turned towards the sound.

I listened carefully. There were two animals - not one - walking along seemingly without a care in the world. There was something familiar about

the cadence of those shuffling footsteps. Then I smiled because I knew exactly what it was. Ben and Mbuyotsi had come to the rescue!

The two trackers had been carefully monitoring the progress of my stalk expecting that, one day, something like this was bound to happen. They had planned their response well in advance. As I suspected, I later learned that it was Ben's idea!

When they saw the confrontation erupt, Ben and Mbuyotsi had immediately set out to apply the only reaction that could possibly have saved the day. They moved off, walking fast to one side, to draw the rhino's attention away from me. They were outside the rhino's range of vision and well downwind of our position. So the rhino did not know what they were, but it could hear them. The trackers' solution was as brilliant as it was simple. It was exactly what the situation had demanded - an innocuous diversion.

When the distracting noise became constant - and when it moved past our position to the left - the rhino re-orientated its body to the left too, so as to keep its nose and ears facing directly towards the new cause for concern.

And the rhino forgot all about me. It lifted its head high and snuffled loudly at the air:

'Uff-fuh... Uff-fuh... Uff-fuh'. There was no scent at all so it could not identify the noise it was listening to. It could see nothing. So it was reliant upon its ears which were focused, like a matching pair of satellite antennae, to the front.

The trackers kept their distance but they moved in a circle around the rhino's position. This caused the rhino to turn more and more to the left, its ears constantly following the trackers' route. Very soon I had the rhino facing diagonally away from me. It was still only 10 paces away.

The big bull took three or four steps to the right - preparatory, I suspect, to running away - and it presented me, for a brief few seconds, with an absolutely clear shot at its rump. The dart flew true and the needle embedded itself in the rhino's buttocks three inches to the right of its anus.

I dropped to the ground and rolled up into a foetal ball amongst the leaves.

With aloud *WHOOOSH*, the rhino tucked its tail hard into its anus. It spun round with a lot of *phafh... phafh...phafh...* protestations. Fortunately, I was already curled up on the ground, so it didn't see me. Almost within touching distance now, it ran past me with its nose into the wind.

When the danger was over, I sat up amongst the leaves and watched the rhino running away - tripling along like a horse - zig-zagging as it looked back with an eye over one shoulder, then with the other eye over the other shoulder. The red pom-pom woollen flight stuck out like a sore thumb. It told me that the dart was still firmly in place.

I listened to rhino's departure for a long time after it disappeared from view: hearing it crashing through the jesse; visualizing it kicking over dead logs and tree branches that had been left on the ground by feeding elephants. The constant and rhythmic *pommm... pommm... pommm...* sound of its tripling hooves beating the ground, slowly faded into the distance.

Then it was gone. Silence reigned. I took another very deep breath. The hunt had been scary but successful. I could still feel the quiver in my hands - but I was happy.

When I had gathered my wits about me I examined the scar on my knee and discovered the one time immaculate purple hue was pock-marked by a myriad of new, bright red puncture wounds from the many attentions of the tsetse flies. The bites were hot and itchy and I was still rubbing them when the trackers walked up to me. They both had grins on their faces like ridiculous Cheshire Cats.

“Haaiiiieeeeh!” Ben said loudly, shaking his head. ***“Mahohboh!!!!!!”***

Mahohboh was my African honour name. It alluded, in Bushman language, to my prowess as an elephant hunter.

Ben's announcement was a remonstrance. He was telling me that I was not a cat! I did not have nine lives, one to waste every time I went out hunting. He was right, of course, but I was to discover, over the next 20 years, that I had indeed been blessed with nine lives - and a whole lot more - because, somehow, I continued to survive these hair-brained hunting adventures. And Ben was the one, every time, who waved his magic wand to extricate me from my many, oftentimes preposterous, hunting stunts.

He who dares wins!

To my readers: I invite you to rate the pleasure you obtained from reading this mini-book (Volume 7) on a scale of 1 - 5.

Additionally, I invite you to register your email address with me if you would like to communicate with me directly and/or if you would like to receive a quarterly newsletter advising you of the progress and direction this mini book series will be taking in the months/years ahead. Your opinions could well modify the way these essays are written and/or presented - even their content!

My email address is: magron@ripplesoft.co.za.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Ron Thomson