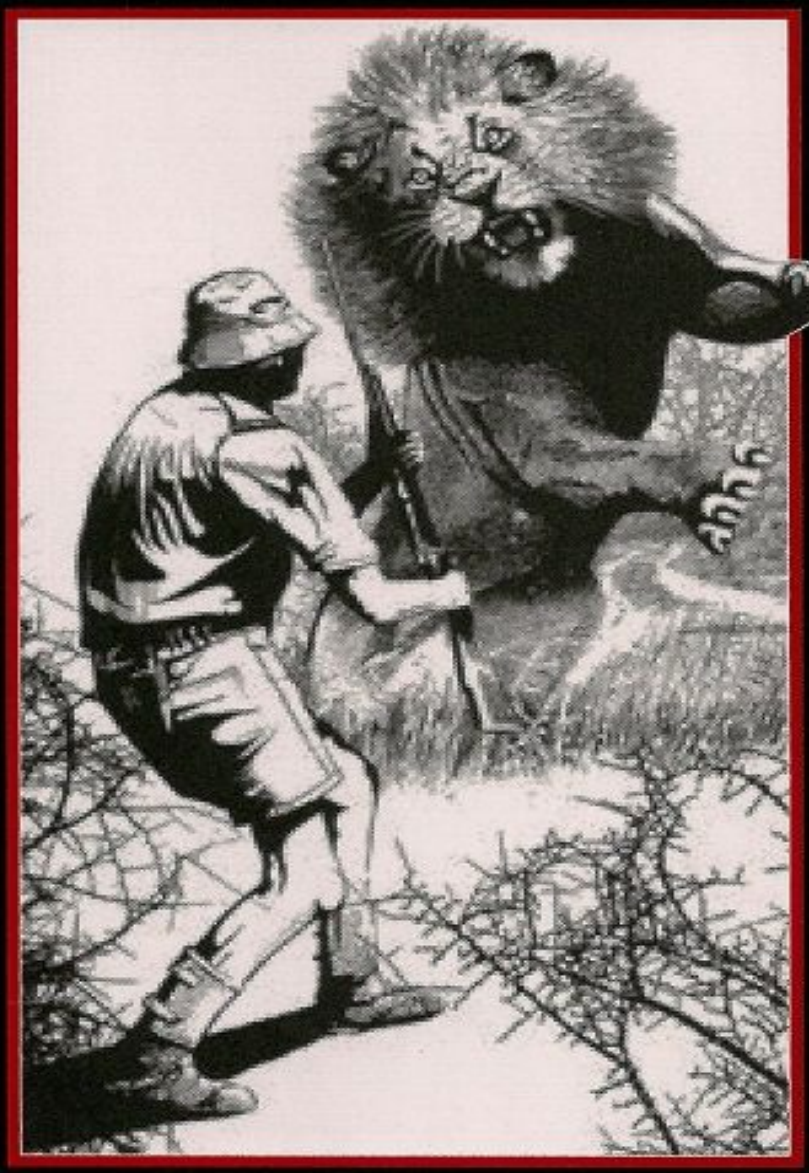

Stand Your Ground

by Ron Thomson

STAND YOUR GROUND

by

RON THOMSON

This book is dedicated to the
memory of
my late wife Babs

and
to my Grahamstown family:
My daughter Karen, my son-in-law Harold
and my grandchildren
Megan, Lara and Richard

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

2010, the year I wrote this book, was an especially difficult year for me for a number of reasons.

I probably would not have got through the year, and this book would not have been written, had I not received the love and support of my friends and colleagues at the AFRICAN OUTFITTER magazine head office: Neels Geldenhys – the Editor-in-Chief and MMWC (The Main Man Wot Counts); Amelia van der Merwe; Adele Gurtel; Monique Joubert; Hannie Smit; the late Marinda Knox; and Elfriede Ainslie. Thank you one and all.

I would also like to say a big 'Thank You' to Colin Lortan for his continuing support in the design of the books that I write in order to bring them up to a printable standard – something he has been doing for me now for twenty years. 'Thank You', Colin, for your support throughout all these years, and for your continued friendship.

Ron Thomson

Life is not about waiting for
the storm to pass
But learning how to dance
in the rain

A Lifetime of Big Game Hunting in Africa

AFTER having written the foreword to the first book in Ron Thomson's big game hunting memoir series, I consider it a great honour to have been asked by the author to write a foreword to this his second book in the six-book series, too.

As many followers of Ron's *'Mahohboh on the Hunt'* column in The African OUTFITTER magazine have discovered, his repertoire of big game hunting stories seems to be limitless. These stories all have a texture of excellence and they resonate such authenticity that I know of nobody who has come away disappointed after reading them.

What some readers have said is that they cannot understand how one man could possibly have had so much big game hunting experience in one short lifetime. Well…! That is what these six books are all about. They tell the remarkable story of the author's 24 years' service as a game ranger in Rhodesia's (now Zimbabwe's) Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management; and they explain how and why, as a government game ranger, he became so deeply and extensively involved in the hunting of Africa's dangerous 'Big Five' animals.

The author has no definite record of the number of big game animals he has hunted. This is because there is a host of complicating details that make such finite numbers impossible to ascertain. His roll-over annual personal scores suggest that he has hunted, in a conventional manner, at *least* 5000 elephants, at *least* 700 buffaloes; at *least* 50 lions; at *least* 30 leopards; and the capture (with a dart gun) of 140 black rhinos. All these animals were tracked down on foot, and shot (or darted – in the case of the rhinos) in the conventional hunting manner. No 'culling' figures are included.

The 2500 elephants and 300 hippos that he and his team culled in the Gonarezhou National Park, in the 1970s, are additional to Ron's personal score. Altogether, the author was a dominant participant in an official

(Rhodesian and then Zimbabwean) wildlife management programme that, *inter alia*, '*took off*' (hunted and/or culled) 44 506 elephants in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

In Appendix One to this book, the author evaluates his hunting experiences in an entirely different manner. He has assessed the number of hours he has spent '*actually hunting*' Africa's big game animals – and by '*actually hunting*' he means *just* the number of hours he has spent tracking these animals and shooting them. It does NOT include the time it took him to walk back to his Land Rover after the hunt was over. His conservative estimate comes to an incredible minimum of 25 000 hours. This equates to 5,7 years of '*actually hunting*' Africa's big game animals, every day of every year, from dawn till dusk. This is an extraordinary, almost unbelievable, statistic.

It is from this incredible wealth of experience that Ron Thomson draws his big game hunting stories. He draws them, indeed, from a bottomless pit.

Nobody in the history of mankind will ever have the same big game hunting opportunities that Ron Thomson has enjoyed. Those days in Africa have gone forever. Nobody will ever experience the kind of game ranging and big game hunting career that Ron Thomson has had. The hunters of the world, therefore, should be very happy that he is writing his big game hunting memoirs now.

There has never been a set of African big game hunting books quite like these books are proving to be; and there never will be again.

The first book in the series – GOD CREATED MAN THE HUNTER – tells the story of the beginnings of the author's big game hunting career. It lays the foundation for all those books that are to follow.

This second book in the series – STAND YOUR GROUND – records the author's three-year-long period of hunting maturation (1961 to 1963). It tells the story of how he filled in all the major gaps that existed in his big game hunting experience after his initial three-month-long extensive, but nevertheless still rudimentary, elephant hunting training was over. When the stories told in this second book come to an end, the reader will understand that the author had, by that stage, evolved into a highly experienced big game hunter.

If you are a hunter-at-heart, read these books. They will boggle your

mind and they will boil your blood. Read them… and enjoy!

Neels Geldenhuys
Managing Director
African OUTFITTER Magazine
October 2010

What advice can you give a novice big game hunter who is finally attacked by the irate animal he has been hunting all day long…?

STAND YOUR GROUND

This implies that you prepare yourself to kill the animal that is attacking you, or to be killed by it.
There is no point in running away.

You just HAVE to ‘stand your ground’ and face it – and do the very best that you can

PART ONE

Hwange National Park
1961

AT THE BEGINNING of 1961 Hwange National Park was, and had been since 1928, a sleepy hollow. 1928 was the year Ted Davison took up his appointment as the park's first Game Warden.

Nothing much happened over those 32 years. There was little money for development and progress was slow. Nevertheless, 'Mr. D' established a small rest camp for visitors at Main Camp supported by a rudimentary network of flat-graded, partly-gravelled game viewing roads. Primitive though all this was, by modern standards, by 1961 it had put Main Camp on the map as a game viewing tourist destination.

Tourism did not flourish in the game reserve because the main road between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls was, until the early 1960s, just two strips of tarmac. It was *not* a user-friendly road. And Hwange Main Camp, with its minimal tourist facilities, was twenty miles off the middle part of this important but still primitive thoroughfare. Only very devout game viewing visitors were prepared to brave these trying circumstances.

When Southern Rhodesia's Chief Game Warden, Ted Davison, transferred to Head Office in Salisbury at the beginning of 1961, pending retirement, Senior Game Warden Bruce Austen took over the reins. This coincided with a major change in the game reserve's circumstances. The national park suddenly started to blossom, but the change was not of Bruce's making.

Bruce Austen was much younger than Ted Davison and he was at the peak of his career. He was experienced in game management and he had proved to be a highly capable administrator. Government's plans for Hwange needed such a person at the helm in 1961 because a lot of money was about to be injected into the national park's development.

Whilst Britain was mulling over how it was going to dissolve the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, the Federal Prime Minister, Sir Roy Welensky, did everything in his power to prepare for an inevitable confrontation with black nationalism and he foresaw the predictable Rhodesian break away from Britain and the Commonwealth. Consequently

he re-equipped the Royal Rhodesian Air Force with helicopters and Hunter jet fighters and the army with armoured cars, artillery and a brand new Special Air Service (S.A.S.) military unit. He placed all this under the control of the Southern Rhodesian government.

The Federal Prime Minister, throughout the remaining three years of the federation, also injected large amounts of money into the Federal National Parks Department. The inoculation of these funds had a profound effect on Hwange. Main Camp was the principal beneficiary.

In 1961, Hwange National Park, as it still does today, comprised 5000 square miles of wild Africa. Seven eighths of the park consists of fossil Kalahari sand dunes clothed primarily in teak forest. The remainder is basalt country covered in mixed woodlands, mainly mopani. The Kalahari sand region is naturally waterless in the dry season. The basalt country, on the other hand, has more fertile soils and it is richly endowed with perennial streams, wet vleis and both hot-water and cold-water springs.

There were then fifteen bore-holed game water supplies serving the Kalahari sand regions. Without this artificial water supply system there would have been no game animals in the greater part of the park.

The annual game count that was conducted in October 1960, revealed that Hwange was then carrying 3500 elephant. This was far too many. There were indications that excessive elephant damage was pushing the *mukwa* tree *(Pterocarpus angolensis)* – elsewhere in southern African known as *kiaat* – and the *mlala* palm *(Hyphaene crinita),* into local extinction. Other trees were moving in the same direction.

Grazing was under pressure, too. The park’s buffalo, zebra and wildebeest populations were also too high!

Buffalo are carriers of a tick-borne disease called *Theleriosis* (corridor fever) which is fatal to cattle. They are also carriers of foot-and-mouth disease which, when outbreaks occur, is damaging to the national economy.

Important decisions came out of the management meeting that followed that game count. All elephants and all buffaloes that wandered across the boundaries of the national park were to be eliminated. Both Ted Davison *and* Bruce Austen believed that *if* enough elephants and buffaloes could be killed *outside* the park, where the meat could be distributed amongst the local native people, it might be possible to avoid having to institute culling operations *inside* the national park. This policy was to have a profound effect on my career.

My arrival at Main Camp occurred just ten days before this momentous decision was made. I was dropped in at the deep-end of an incredible elephant and buffalo hunting programme that kick-started my big game hunting career in a manner that nothing else could possibly have achieved better. It also opened my eyes, for the very first time, to the practical principles and practices of *'wildlife management'*.

I was the last young game ranger to be appointed under Ted Davison. This *just* brought me into the fold of those men who had pioneered the *old* Hwange. I fell directly under the command of Bruce Austen.

* * *

The first book in this series – GOD CREATED MAN THE HUNTER – tells the story of my early big game hunting adventures as a teenager. It catalogues my novice years. This was the period in my life when I taught myself how to hunt leopards, when I killed my first big crocodile and when I inexpertly hunted my first elephant. They were my years of hunting by trial and error. This was a period of my life when I often endured huge fears and trepidations whenever I faced danger in the raw – but this did not stop me hunting. It was a time in my life when my imagination controlled my emotions. Nevertheless, I taught myself how to rein in my fears and how to keep them under control.

The first book includes my elven month period of service as a cadet game ranger in the Matopos National Park. I became part of the capture team that restocked the national park with a wide range of young game animals. It explains the rationale that supported the decision to shoot out all the leopards in the game park section of the park. During those few short months I shot several cattle-killing leopards, also. The first book contains several good leopard-hunting stories.

Finally, GOD CREATED MAN THE HUNTER covered my first three months at Main Camp. This was when I entered the real gameranging world. During this period Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke taught me the art and the craft of hunting elephant. He was with me when I shot my first three buffaloes – one of which remains amongst the most dangerous of all my big game hunting experiences. By the end of this mentorship I had shot nineteen elephants and I had proved myself capable of hunting these huge animals on my own. I also shot my first stock-killing lion.

This, the second book of my Big Game Hunting Memoir series, starts

where the first book left off – January 1961. It records my first three years at Hwange. This was my maturation period. It catalogues, therefore, the *real* start of my big game hunting career that covered the next twenty-three years.

* * *

EARLY in January 1961, Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke and I were on our way to *'somewhere'*. I don't remember where. We had to pass Nyamandhlovu Pan to get there. It was brimful of water. When we arrived at Nymandhlovu there was a large pack of wild dogs lounging about the waterhole. We stopped and looked at them.

There were no tourists about. In those years the park was closed to tourists from November to April, the rainy season, when the park's rough dirt roads were impassable to ordinary two-wheel drive vehicles. *"How many?"* Tim asked.

I began counting. *"Sixteen,"* I said. *"There may be more in the bushes at the back."*

"Guess we'd better go back to Main Camp and get ourselves some smaller rifles," Tim opined. All we had with us were two .375 Magnums. Both weapons were held securely in the hands of our two Bushman trackers, Japan and Ben, who were sitting on the open deck at the back of the Land Rover.

"You want to shoot them?" I inquired of Tim, surprised.

"That's what the rule book says," Tim replied. *"When we see wild dogs we must shoot them. It is something that Mister D. has been doing for years. He says they scare the game away from the tourist roads and he still wants to build up the game herds for the tourists."*

I said nothing but I felt uncomfortable about the idea.

The dogs did not seem to be in a hurry to go anywhere so Tim turned the green government Land Rover round and we returned to Main Camp seven miles back.

At Main Camp Tim picked up his .22 Savage rifle, from the single quarters gun rack, stuffing several handfuls of loose ammunition into his trouser pockets. Then we went to the administration office, a small whitewashed two-roomed building where all the Main Camp field staff worked. There was nobody in the office. There Tim took out a government issue .22 Hornet rifle from the station armoury. This he handed to me together with an unopened pack of cartridges.

We climbed back into the Land Rover and returned to Nyamandhlovu. The trackers each now carried two rifles.

The dogs were still there. When we stopped the Land Rover and climbed the steps to the tourist game viewing platform, located some 100 yards back from the water, the dogs looked at us inquisitively. One or two stood up and walked towards us to see what we were doing. The trackers climbed up with us to watch the show.

"Take whatever you can see and hit," Tim said matter-of-factly. He had obviously done this before – probably many times. *"Let me shoot the big dog in the front first."*

We sat in the canvas chairs with which the platform was equipped, and we leant our rifles on the top pole of the surrounding safety barrier in front. This was where the bulk of Main Camp's tourists came to see the big elephant herds at the water every dry season evening.

The trackers sat down in other chairs at the far end of the platform. During all this while neither Bushmen had uttered a single word.

Tim shot first – and again before I got my first shot off. Two dogs went down. My first shot killed a third one. The pack was up and running. Tim brought down another one in full flight. I waited for the dogs to stop. One did and looked back. I dropped him just as soon I had him in my sights. Then they were gone, racing off into the heavy-leafed scrub.

The five carcasses lay still amidst the *tribulus* weeds that filled up the flat and open ground surrounding the pan. The weeds were a mass of short green leafed plants growing close to the ground all bedecked in lovely buttercup yellow flowers. The flowers changed into the notorious *deweltjie* thorns that stuck into the soles of our boots, *en masse*, during the dry season.

The scene was incongruous. A light breeze rippled the water surface on the pond. And the mottled bodies of the five dogs lay grotesquely amidst all this natural beauty. Death amidst the buttercups!

I got up from my chair. *"Sit down,"* Tim commanded. *"We haven't finished yet. They'll come back."*

I sat down and waited. Presently I heard the dogs calling in the distance. Their calls were prolonged *whoops* that travelled very far. The survivors were missing their fallen comrades. They were calling them, inviting them to come back to the pack.

This is what Tim had been waiting for. He responded, calling exactly like the dogs had called, and he kept it up for some time.

The whole pack came running back. They ran about sniffing at the bodies of the dead dogs, all the while looking around in a bewildered fashion. Tim shot another two. I shot another one. Then they were gone again back into the bush.

This time they never called again. Tim waited a while and he tried to call them back a second time. He had no success.

The trackers carefully leant the four rifles against the cement bricks of the steps and they went out to where the dead dogs lay. They dragged them by their tails and hid their bodies behind an anthill on the far side of the pan, all together and out of sight. Shortly after that the Bushmen emerged from behind the anthill with the eight fluffy dogs' tails in their hands.

"We'll surrender the tails to the Native Commissioner in Hwange Colliery Town next time we go there," Tim said to me matter-of-factly. *"Wild Dogs are on the vermin list,"* he told me. *"We'll get two pounds and ten shillings for every tail."*

I worked out my sums. Twenty pounds! We'd get twenty pounds cash for the eight wild dog tails! I looked at Tim surprised. That was half my monthly salary!

"And we can do that?" I inquired.

"Regular procedure," Tim smiled.

"Don't we have to give that money back to government?" I asked perplexed.

"Nope!" Tim replied succinctly. *"We have always surrendered the dog tails to the Native Commissioner and we have always collected the bounty. Nobody has ever said we can't do that and we have always done it."* Tim's eyes crinkled into a quiet smile. *"You and I live together in single quarters so we can use the money to help pay for this month's single quarters' bills. What do you say to that?"*

I smiled back and shrugged my shoulders. *"Yah! Why not?"* I agreed. *"Just so long as its legal."*

"Oh it's legal all right," Tim assured me. *"It is what we always do whenever we kill wild dogs."* He grinned.

Ben threw the tails into the back of the Land Rover. The trackers picked up the four rifles and climbed up behind the vehicle's cab.

"Come, let's go," Tim then instructed. *"We've still got a job of work to do."*

* * *

Today the idea that game rangers in our national parks should be instructed to shoot wild dogs – now considered to be an 'endangered species' – would cause a public outcry. In 1961, however, this was the state of affairs that pertained in Rhodesia's Hwange National Park and I participated in it. The fact that the game rangers who shot the dogs were allowed to personally collect the substantial vermin bounty rewards would also now raise eyebrows.

At the same time it must also be said that, up until about 1965, the skins that game rangers obtained from their hunting of leopards and lions were also retained by them personally. There was no requirement at all that these skins should be surrendered to government.

Readers, therefore, should not be too judgemental when reading the stories related in these six memoir books. They tell of some events that, today, would never be countenanced. To be able to understand and to accept these events, they need to be properly evaluated in the context of the historical times in which they took place. This was the last wild dog hunt ever to be conducted in Hwange National Park.

1961 was a year that saw the start of many major changes in Rhodesia as a whole, and in Hwange National Park in particular. This last wild dog hunt, therefore, can be used as the benchmark against which these changes took place.

* * *

The most momentous happening in 1961 was the transfer of Ted Davison to Salisbury. He was appointed to the post of an Assistant Director which had been especially created for him. The purpose of this transfer was to ease the old man into retirement gently. All the Davison family's furniture and personal possessions, collected over 32 years in Hwange, were transported at government expense to Salisbury (now Harare). He was able to then seek, and to purchase, a suitable new house in one of the suburbs in Salisbury city. And when the time came for his final departure from the department – one year later – Ted Davison, and his wife Connie, were able to slide comfortably into retirement without much ado.

Just before his departure Mister D. sold all his cattle, so the convenience and the burden of having a tsetse-fly test herd at Main Camp fell away. There were other changes, too. For example, once the old man was ensconced securely in his head office post, Bruce Austen rescinded Mister D's long

standing instruction that wild dogs were to be shot on sight.

Upon Ted Davison's departure, Bruce took over the reins of command for the whole national park. Prior to 1961 he had been in-charge of *only* the greater Kalahari sand region, the headquarters of which was Main Camp. In view of the developments that followed, it almost looked as though the old man's departure had been orchestrated to bring about Bruce's ascendance to this leadership role. But that was not true.

There were hugely momentous activities taking place in the political arena at this time. Most of the political maneouvering was far above my head. What happened, for the most part, came and went without me being in any way conscious of, or interested in, the probable consequences. I was totally disinterested in politics and far too wrapped up in my blossoming game ranger career to worry about the long-term effects the political activities were going to have on my life.

The British government made a decision in 1960 to dissolve the Central African Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi), both protectorates under the British Crown, were to be given their independence immediately. Southern Rhodesia, which had been self-governing since 1923, was denied its independence because the white Rhodesians refused to hand over governance of the country to the largely illiterate black majority.

Southern Rhodesia's discussions with Great Britain over this issue were to drag on for the next twenty years. In 1964 the first exploratory terrorist incursions into Rhodesian territory occurred. This marked the start of the Rhodesian Bush War otherwise known as the '*Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle'*. These terrorists (or freedom fighters – depending on your political persuasion!) were the Russian-trained soldiers of the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). ZIPRA was the military wing of the all-black political party known as the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). ZAPU was led by the black nationalist leader, Joshua Nkomo.

The bush war went on for the next 16 years and I was to become embroiled in what happened at every turn. In 1965, after exhausting political discussions over several years, it became apparent to the Rhodesians that there was no hope at all that Britain would ever entertain the white Rhodesians' way of thinking.

Britain continually demanded that the white Rhodesians should abdicate and hand their country over to its black majority. When the Rhodesian

government finally understood that there was no hope of a compromise it stunned the world with its Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965.

This heralded the beginning of the end for white Rhodesians like me. But in 1961 the culmination of the black man's liberation struggle was still nineteen years away. And an awful lot happened in those nineteen years!

* * *

Between 1961 and 1963, Hwange experienced the development of an unbelievable and unprecedented tourism infrastructure. All the huts in the Main Camp tourist accommodations were revamped, plastered and painted. The 12 huts with asbestos roofs were thatched. A very large thatched dining room was constructed in the rest camp with a large and modern kitchen. All the ablution blocks were renovated. Several new semi-detached family lodges, under thatch, were constructed and equipped. The camping ground ablutions were replaced with a new ablution block. A new combined tourist-and-administration office was built.

The dirt access road to Main Camp was restructured and properly gravelled. A fifty-mile long brand new road from Main Camp to Shumba picnic site, half way to Robins Camp, was professionally constructed and tarred. All the gravel tourist game viewing roads out of Main Camp were upgraded. This preceded the day when the game reserve was eventually opened for visitor use throughout the year.

Robins Camp was similarly revamped. The game viewing roads that supported tourism in that region of the park were all given a face-lift, too.

An airstrip capable of taking DC3 passenger planes was constructed on the Main Camp vlei. At first this was just a gravel strip but as the idea of visiting Hwange by air caught on with tourists, the surface was tarred.

On the game management front, more and more boreholes were sunk every year into the drainage lines between the teak-forested sand dunes. Most of these were equipped with windmills using sophisticated mono pumps to get the deep underground water to the surface. Many were equipped also with diesel engines. This required that access tracks be opened up to many very remote parts of the park – parts that had only, until that time, been accessible on horseback.

Over time this led to four times the number of boreholes operating in the park compared to the number when I first got there. Sixty instead of fifteen! New game viewing platforms were erected for visitor use at selected water

holes.

Most of this development occurred over the next three years. The game water supply programme took longer. Everything took time to happen. But it began in 1961.

During Mister D's time at Hwange, Main Camp's meat rations for its native staff came from the slaughter of two cattle every week. The cattle were purchased from farmers outside the park. They were slaughtered and cut up at the Dahlia Ranch butchery. The butchery was located on the Bulawayo-to-Victoria-Falls main road, twenty miles from Main Camp. Once a week, a five-ton lorry went to the butchery to pick up the meat. Each native member of our staff, therefore, received a rough lump of beef once a week.

Bruce changed all that. He managed to persuade the national park head office that it was ridiculous for the park to pay local farmers for cattle when we were all worried that the national park was carrying too many grazers – particularly buffalo. He proposed that we should start shooting two buffalo a week for rations, and that this shooting should take place on the very edge of the park. Head Office agreed. Thereafter it became my weekly task to seek these buffalo out and to shoot two of them. This happened every Friday.

It did not take Bruce Austen very long, therefore, to stamp his signature on Hwange National Park.

Times they were a-changing!

* * *

With the departure of Ted Davison, the field officer establishment at Main Camp was reduced to four: Senior Game Warden Bruce Austen; Senior Game Ranger Harry Cantle; Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke; and me – a cadet game ranger at the very beginning of my career. Four had been the field staff complement before my precipitous transfer to Main Camp the previous October. So, I guess my *'additional'* presence filled up the vacancy nicely. No other staff were appointed when Mister D. left us.

Bruce's job was largely administrative and it became ever more so as the year progressed. Harry was, for the most part, occupied with overhauling all the game water supply pumps, engines and windmills. This was his principal job during the wet season. It was his job to make ready all this essential machinery for the coming six-months-long dry season. The game water supply pumps would then be working hard 24/7. This left only Tim and me to do the game ranging fieldwork that happened, or didn't happen, on an ad hoc basis.

The fieldwork, from 1961 onwards changed hugely compared to previous years. The elimination of all elephant and buffalo that crossed the park boundaries was an enormous additional workload. So was the shooting of two buffalo a week for labour rations.

In 1961 the Veterinary Department began constructing a game-proof fence all along the park's boundary with the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands. It started on the railway line at Ngamo and it followed the meandering Sehumi fossil drainage line as far south as Makona Pan. From Makona the fence followed a totally straight bulldozed line through the seasonally waterlogged sidaga-veld, right down to where the Nata River left Rhodesia and entered Botswana. The erection of this game fence was a daunting task.

The purpose of the fence was to protect the national domestic cattle herd from the diseases that the game reserve's wild animals harboured. By the end of January 1961, only a few miles of this fence had been erected and already the elephants were playing havoc with it. Nearly every day the construction team did as much repair work to the damaged fence behind them, as they were able to do to advance the fence further down the Sehumi. Even before it was completed, the fence was proving no deterrent to the passage, both ways, of Hwange's big elephant bulls.

I shot my eighteenth elephant in January 1961. I had killed all these animals under the mentorship of Tim Braybrooke – except for the last one which I had shot in the company of Game Ranger Tony Boyce (from Robins Camp).

My buffalo hunting experience was then minimal. In October I had killed two big bulls – and Tim had done the same – when we had, together, removed four bulls from the Dett vlei. I had killed another one, with Tim, in the sinanga thickets of the teak forest at Ngamo in December. Three was then my sum total.

* * *

I was working on my January 1961 monthly report in the office, when I overheard Tim and Bruce talking quietly together on the verandah outside.

In those days, writing my monthly report was a laborious exercise. All of us game rangers punched the typewriter keys one letter, with one finger, at a time. Making us type our reports had one advantage. It made the reports short-and-sweet.

"Do you think he can handle it?" I heard Bruce ask Tim.

"Yes," Tim responded without hesitation. *"He'll be O.K."*

"MMMmmm," I heard Bruce musing over Tim's answer. *"O.K.,"* Bruce said after a while. *"We'll give it a go."* There was a pause. Then Bruce said to Tim. *"All right then…. You drive carefully now. I can't afford for you to have an accident. We're short staffed enough as it is."*

I was starting to understand that Tim and Bruce had a very close relationship. They were, in fact, very good friends despite their differences in years and seniority. I was to understand this more and more as the months and years went by. Bruce knew Tim's mother, he also knew Tim's late father, so that may have been the catalyst.

I knew Tim was going to Bulawayo. I understood, therefore, that it was to this journey that Bruce was referring when he told Tim to *'drive carefully.'* I had a hunch that the other part of their conversation had concerned me.

I don't think Bruce really knew what to do with me in those days. I was then a *very* young-looking twenty-one year old and I was still, then, just a cadet game ranger. I was the first cadet game ranger. There had never been a cadet game ranger in the department until I came along. Bruce, therefore, hadn't handled anyone like me before. I sensed that he was reluctant to give me potentially dangerous work to do on my own. I think he considered me as some kind of glorified teenage kid for whose safety he was directly and personally responsible.

Tim strolled off towards single quarters. Bruce came back into the office and walked towards his new office. It had been, until very recently, the sanctum of old Mister D. I felt him pause behind me. Then he carried on. He went into his office shutting the door behind him. I continued with my tedious typing chore.

Ten minutes later, I heard my name being called through the thick office door. I got up, knocked, and went in.

"Yes, Mr. Austen," I announced myself.

"How's your report going?"

"I'm getting through it," I said tentatively. *"Typing is not my strongpoint."*

"How long will it take you to finish the page you are on," he asked. I then knew he had himself typed similar reports before. He was not about to ask me to do anything when I was only half way through a page.

"Another five or ten minutes," I replied.

"O.K.," he said. *"When you are finished I want you to take a longwheel-based Land Rover and go to the sewage farm this side of Dett. Do you know where it is?"*

"Yes," I said. The Bushman tracker Mbuyotsi and I had walked there from our camp at Shoot Pan, on my first horse patrol, in November.

The sewage farm was a muddled group of settling ponds that eventually spilled out clear water into a large sandy depression. Lots of game animals drank there from the clear water spillage.

"Do you know the track that leads to it?"

"No! But I am sure one of the trackers can tell me."

"Good lad," Bruce said with a smile. *"I want you to take four trackers with you. You will find buffalo there. I want you to shoot two bulls for staff rations."*

I couldn't believe my ears. Malindela was sending me out on my own to shoot two buffalo bulls. I smiled. *"Yes Sir."* I replied happily.

"Take knives and two felling axes with you," Bruce ignored my obviously happy countenance. *"You can load two buffalo bulls on the one Land Rover if you cut the carcasses up into quarters,"* he said with some authority. *"Make sure you have Mbuyotsi or Sumbe with you. They both know what to do."*

Sumbe and Mbuyotsi were the two most senior Bushman trackers at Main Camp.

"Yes Sir, Mr. Austen," I replied.

"O.K. then," he said. *"Go to it. Finish the page you are typing. Then get yourself out to the sewage farm."*

It was midday by the time we reached the sewage farm. Not a good time to start hunting buffalo! The tracks would be from last evening's visitations to the water. That meant following spoor would not be an option. We might be lucky and get them coming back to the water in the evening!

There were game tracks everywhere about the clear water spillage pool. Kudu, zebra, buffalo and elephant seemed to be the four main species, but there was some sable antelope spoor, too.

The four Bushman trackers – Sumbe, Mbuyotsi, Ben and Kitso – climbed off the Land Rover and began examining the spoor. I had told them why we had come to this place and they were eager to find buffalo for me. I immediately handed my .375 Magnum rifle to Ben. He was my chosen gun bearer for the day.

"Let's follow last night's tracks," Sumbe suggested. *"They will take us in the general direction the buffalo went last night and we might just find fresh tracks cutting the old spoor as we go along."*

Sumbe was Bruce Austen's tracker. He was also the boss-man's personal patrol assistant when Bruce went camping. He was considered the senior tracker at Main Camp because of his association with Bruce – but there were several other Bushmen in the Main Camp stable who were much better trackers. Ben was one of them. Mbuyotsi was just as good as Sumbe but Kitso was altogether inferior. Kitso was a good patrol assistant.
He was useful. He worked hard. He was very willing. But he was a useless tracker.

We set off on last night's tracks with the sun beating heavily down on our shoulders. The bush was in heavy leaf and dangerously thick. The teak forest's complex understory was interlaced with hook thorns and spiky Chinese lantern (sicklebos). It was both difficult and noisy to plough through. The trackers call this heavy thicket, *sinanga*.

I tested the wind. It was necessary that I know which way the breezes were playing. To do this, I used a small linen tobacco pouch that the trackers had filled with fresh white wood ash before we left Main Camp. I held the little bag out at arm's length and gave my wrist a single tweek. This sent a small cloud of white dust wafting away on an air current that none of us could see. The dust made the movement of the invisible air obvious and tangible.

The tracks were easy to see. I followed behind Sumbe and Ben, Sumbe having assumed the leadership role that he liked to flaunt. Every ten or fifteen minutes I used the ash bag. It wasn't very long before I developed a pretty good understanding about how the wind was behaving.

Then it happened. Just as Sumbe had suggested it might, we discovered *that* morning's buffalo tracks crossing the old spoor we had been following. The freshness of the dung, the crispness of the hoof-prints in the sand, and the texture of broken-off green leaves that were lying on the ground, told us the buffalo had passed this way at about ten o'clock in the morning. The new tracks were, therefore, no more than three hours old.

The age of the tracks told us something else too. The buffalo having passed this way at about ten o'clock in the morning meant we could be assured they would have gone to ground, for their midday siesta, about an hour later – certainly not any more than *two* hours later. Buffalo don't run

around in the heat of the day unless they are parched and visiting a waterhole. They normally bed down in the shade for several hours round about midday. The fact that the tracks were just three hours old, therefore, was not the important issue. It was the fact that the buffalo had passed that way at about ten o'clock in the morning that was significant. It told us we would, *very soon*, find them lying down, resting, somewhere inside the heavy sinanga.

My growing understanding of such bush lore had been impressed upon me during the many, many collective conversations I had had with Main Camp's several Bushman trackers. I had been under *their* informal instruction for the last three months and I listened attentively to everything they told me. Every one of the trackers had contributed *something* to my ever-growing knowledge. Mbuyotsi and Ben, however, were the two who had taken the most trouble. It was Ben who now cautioned me to be vigilant. He told me that we could bump into these buffalo at any time if we were not alert.

There were six bulls in the group.

The wind was not a problem. It was blowing gently from our right front to our left back all along the tracks. The spoor took us into one shady section of the teak forest (gusu) after another. Eventually the churring calls of oxpeckers ahead gave the buffaloes' position away.

Oxpeckers are small brown birds about the size of a starling. Two species occur in Hwange, the red-billed oxpecker and the yellow-billed oxpecker. They visit the park's large mammals on a daily basis. They continually fossick all over the bodies of their hosts eating blood-bloated ticks, picking off the scabs from scratches, eating the mucus from the animals' nostrils and eyes, and the wax from their ears. In the case of animals with wounds, they drink whatever blood they can extract from the wounded areas and often the raw flesh, too. But ticks are their staple diet.

Oxpeckers in a game reserve are vitally important symbiotic partners of the game animals. They, probably more greatly than any other factor, contribute to the health of the game reserve's wild animals. They significantly reduce the animals' sometimes heavy tick burdens in an environment where tick-borne diseases are rife.

I have never been able to distinguish between the churring calls of the two oxpecker species, nor the much sharper alarm calls they use to warn their hosts when danger threatens. Both species sound very much alike.

When I heard the oxpeckers churring on this occasion, I instructed three of the trackers to remain behind. Ben and I then worked our way forward,

through the heavy sinanga thicket, towards the birds' abrasive calls.

The buffalo were all lying down in the shade of some high teak trees, amidst a profusion of leafy bushes. Effective visibility was down to about ten yards so we had to approach very close before we saw them. At twenty yards what we could see of them was minimal. All I could see were the general outlines of their dark shapes through the multiple branches and leaves. There was the glint of a horn here and there! Occasionally there was the sound of a buffaloes' ears flapping when one or another of them shook its head to rid itself of the pestering birds.

The buffalo were relaxed. The miniscule fidgeting sounds they were making confirmed this.

I was reluctant to approach closer being very conscious of my almost complete lack of experience. It was frightening to be so close to such big and dangerous animals. I looked at Ben. I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows. *What were we to do now?*

Ben smiled. He made a silent gesture with his hands mimicking the actions I would have to make to click off the safety catch of my rifle. He need not have bothered. The safety catch was long ago off.

The tracker then picked up a dead stick from the ground and he quietly led me to the bole of a big teak tree. In his other hand Ben carried a cardboard cartridge box in which there were twenty spare rounds of solid .375 Magnum ammunition. He had made the extra cartridges available just in case I needed them.

I could still not see a single buffalo clearly. Nevertheless, Ben looked at me and gave me the thumbs up sign. This, I assumed, was to tell me he wanted me to be prepared to shoot.

I was ready for whatever Ben had conjured up. I knew he had something up his sleeve. He smiled at me and he nodded. Then he tapped the bole of the tree with the stick he had picked up. One… two… three times.

Immediately all the fidgeting sounds the buffaloes had been making ceased. There was now dead silence. The oxpeckers picked up the vibes. Their incessant chatter stopped. One of the buffaloes blew air forcibly out through its nostrils. It was an alarm signal. Another did the same thing.

I stood my ground understanding now what Ben had just done for me. I leant up against the trunk of the tree my rifle at my shoulder. My eyes peered over the barrel looking to see what the buffalo were going to do next.

In a scurry of sound and movement, a big black buffalo bull lifted itself

out of the concealing bushes. It stood looking, wildly, this way and that. It didn't even know from where the disturbance had come. His body was now in full view. Just his legs and lower belly were concealed by the shrubbery. He was standing broadside on to me so I aimed at a point midway down his body and just behind the animal's shoulder. I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle kicked against my shoulder. The bullet hit the target. The buffalo bucked wildly and ran off into the bushes on our right hand side. I rammed another round into the breech.

With the report of the rifle the other five buffaloes jumped to their feet. They darted here and there, stopped and looked around, not knowing which way to run.

"Tshaya munye," Ben almost shouted in my ear. *Shoot another one.*

The buffalo I had hit had disappeared into the gusu. I did not know if my bullet had killed him or if he was just wounded. I was reluctant to shoot a second buffalo until I knew what had happened to the first one. The last thing I wanted was to return to Main Camp to tell Bruce that I had wounded a buffalo. It would be even worse if I had to tell him I had wounded two buffaloes.

"Tshaya munye," Ben instructed me again, this time more urgently. He was getting agitated. He could see all the buffaloes running away before we had collected the second bull that we needed. He looked at me aghast. *"Tshaya!"* he said again very loudly. *"Nkosana,"* he implored me. *"Tshaya munye."*

All five buffaloes heard the altercation. They turned as a group and loped off in the direction the first one had taken. My next bullet caught one of them right behind its shoulder blade. I felt sure it would pass right through to the animal's lungs.

Then they were gone.

I stood still and I listened to the buffaloes' hooves beating thunderously into the Kalahari sand of the forest floor. There was the sound of their heavy bodies racing through the sinanga. There was the occasional breaking of a dead branch or the splintering crack of a living sapling. The sounds of their departure gradually faded.

The other trackers came running up to us, appearing from nowhere, seemingly coming out of the woodwork. Their eyes were wild with the excitement of the moment.

"Hah!" I exclaimed to Mbuyotsi when he confronted me. I shook my

head in dismay. I was quite convinced I had just wounded two buffalo bulls. What was I going to tell Malindela?

'Malindela' was Bruce Austen's African honour name. A simple translation of the title was: *'The one who follows'*. It implied that Bruce *'followed'* everyone wherever they went; and that he was able to find out what had happened, how it had happened and why it had happened, no matter what subterfuge was employed to hide the truth.

To understand the meaning of a white man's African honour name you have to know just how the natives interpret it. In this case, how the Bushmen interpret it! Bruce had established a very fine rapport with the Bushman tracker community at Main Camp. I was to learn that the trackers were his main source of information.

Mbuyotsi smiled at me. He shook his head sharply negating my obvious fears and assumptions. He had seen the anguish in my face and he must have known what was passing through my mind. *"Wait,"* he said to me kindly. *"We will soon know what has happened to your buffaloes."*

We waited for what I knew not. Then, away in the distance, there came the mournful bellow of a buffalo in distress.

"Number One," Mbuyotsi said with a smile. The animal continued its melancholy moaning. It sounded like a sorrowful spirit descending into the bowels of hell.

Then there came the sound of a second buffalo bellowing. That too went on and on until its moans died away in the same manner.

"Number Two," Mbuyotsi said gleefully. *"You got both your buffaloes. They are both dead."*

I remembered then the four buffaloes that Tim and I had shot on the Dett vlei not so long ago. They too had all let out similar bellows of distress when they were *in extremis*. Tim had called those mournful tones *'the dying buffalo's swansong'*.

We found both buffaloes dead within 100 yards of the place where I had shot them. Both bullets had found the lungs. Both had been good clean shots.

The next requirement was to bring the Land Rover into the forest right up to where the buffalo had fallen. It was a two-mile journey and it needed a lot of careful driving, winding the vehicle through the big trees and riding over or under the sinanga. Eventually we got to the first carcass. Ben came with me on the trip. It was his job – by calling like a spotted hyena or by whistling like a lost guineafowl – to communicate with the trackers at the carcasses.

This was the only way to bring the two parties together.

Then began the butchering. The trackers first degutted the carcasses. The liver and the stomach were extracted. The gall-bladder and the bile duct were carefully removed from the liver. The contents were then removed from each of the buffalo's four stomachs. Both these organs were laid on fresh green leaves some distance from the carcasses. Immediately thereafter the two fillets, and the two long and heavy dorsal muscles, were cut out and placed alongside the liver.

The buffalo's head and the whole of its neck, as one unit, was cut off first and thrown into the open back of the Land Rover. The skin was not removed. The rest of the carcass was then roughly quartered.

The ground on both sides of the carcass, and underneath it, was first covered in leafy branches (to stop the meat from coming into contact with the fine Kalahari sand substrate). No skin was removed from the carcass either, also to protect the meat from being covered in sand.

The carcass was then cut in two – into front and back halves – by severing the spine with a felling axe. This enabled the front and back sections to be handled separately.

The buffalo's chest was cut through the brisket with a heavy felling axe. This enabled the two front legs to be pulled apart, which exposed the spine inside. The whole front section was then split in half, lengthwise along the spine, with a felling axe. The two front-quarter pieces – each comprising a front leg and one whole side-of-ribs – were then thrown into the back of the Land Rover.

The back legs were similarly cut through the pelvic region, along the line of the spine. Those two-quarter sections were also committed to the back of the Land Rover. The liver, stomach, fillets and dorsal muscles, were then loaded, being given a preferential place on the back of the Land Rover, lying on a bed of green leaves.

This completed the dissection of one buffalo carcass.

The second buffalo was cut up in exactly the same fashion and its carcass, similarly reduced to four quarters, was added to the Land Rover's load.

It will be of interest to readers to learn that a buffalo's front leg and shoulder (after it has been skinned, dressed and detached from the front side of the body) is considerably heavier than the skinned and dressed

back leg. This is probably occasioned by the fact that the front legs carry considerably more carcass weight – including a massive head and neck – than do the back legs. In most other animals the back legs are much heavier than the front legs.

The trackers performed this dissection exercise with every buffalo we shot for rations or for biltong. They became very slick in its execution and, every week, in next to no time, they had both buffalo carcasses cut up and loaded onto the back of the Land Rover.

Two trackers sat with me in the front of the vehicle – to keep their weight off the back springs. Two sat on top of the meat in the back. We drove the ten-or-so miles back to Main Camp, on the sandy Dett dirttrack road, with our back springs flat and our rear end hanging low. We drove at a snail's pace.

Two buffalo bull carcasses is probably the heaviest load that a long wheel-base Land Rover is capable of carrying. We never ever broke a spring and we carried out this exercise, religiously, every week.

We off-loaded the carcass pieces at Main Camp's new butchery rooms. Here they were skinned and hung on heavy steel meat hooks. The meat was stripped from the bones and cut into chunks. It was then laid out in equal-sized piles on a large, washed, cement slab. Every native labourer and every native game scout, and the families of every game scout who was out in the field on patrol, was given an equal pile of fresh buffalo meat that same evening. A portion of cut-up bones – cut into small sections on the butchery's new band saw – was added to each pile of meat. This was the weekly meat ration for every man and woman whose name appeared on the native staff rosters that week. These rations were infinitely greater in weight than that which the staff had been used to when it had been policy to buy beef from Dahlia Ranch butchery.

As the hunter and supervisor of the ration hunts, I had the choice of a selection of the best portions of the carcasses. Inevitably all four fillets found their way into the single quarter's deep freeze every week. So did both livers, both tongues and both tails. And a large chunk of *rug-string* (dorsal muscle) meat was minced for single quarters, too. During the years 1961, 1962 and 1963, therefore, the single, white game rangers of Main Camp feasted on the best of fare that the ration buffaloes could provide.

Some of this meat went to officer staff other than those resident at single

quarters. Fillets, tails and livers found their way into Bruce and Judy Austen's refrigerator, and into Harry and Betty Cantle's house. And when, due to patrol exigencies, the meat stocks proved to be too much for the needs of the game rangers at single quarters, the surplus was passed onto their trackers. Nothing went to waste. During those three years when I lived at Main Camp in the early 1960s, I had buffalo meat coming out my ears.

* * *

The following week found Tim and me back in the Tjolotjo teak forests, this time twenty miles south of Ngamo. We started off following a lone elephant bull that had vacated a local garden sometime around midnight. As usual, on the teak forest sands, the tracking was easy. We had been on the spoor for only about an hour, however, when it was cut by the fresh tracks of whole herd of elephants. There were big cow elephants, half grown elephants and tiny babies in the group.

Tim looked at me and said. *"Now we go for the herd."*

"There are babies in the herd!" I observed, looking down at the tracks. I wondered what Tim was going to do about the babies.

"They are elephants, too," Tim stated bluntly. *"We must take them all out – all of them – including the babies. Those are our instructions."*

I thought about shooting baby elephants and I shook my head. The very idea made me uncomfortable.

It is recommended that before you proceed any further with this narrative, that you read Appendix Two at the end of this book. It explains, in brief, the rationale in support of removing entire elephant breeding herds when population reduction exercises are undertaken.

It also explains why we were instructed to shoot the baby elephants, too.

"Have you ever shot out a whole breeding herd before, Tim?"

Tim shook his head. *"Nope! None of us in Hwange has ever shot out a whole breeding herd before."*

"Is it possible?"

"We'll soon find out," Tim opined with a bland smile. *"There is a herd of elephants at the end of these tracks."* He seemed not in the least bit perturbed.

"From what I have read about cowherds they can become very aggressive and dangerous," I told him. I was like a dog chewing on a bone.

"All the old timers tell you in their books that you should keep away from the cows. They say that when their calves are threatened the cows will attack the hunter en masse."

"Yes, I've read that too," Tim told me. *"It happened to me once. I shot a crippled cow in a herd – it had a snare around its one foot – and I was chased all over the place by the other cows. Things got a bit hectic for a while but I never felt in any real danger. Cows are much smaller than bulls. Even a very big matriarch is much smaller than just an ordinary mature bull. They are much easier to kill. I came away from that experience believing that had I stood my ground I could have shot dead every cow that came anywhere near me."*

"And the babies?" My mind kept coming back to the baby elephants in the herd.

"Don't get sentimental on me, Ron." Tim said gruffly. *"They've got to go, too. Don't think about it. Just shoot them. At the end of the day a dead baby elephant is just another tail to count."*

> *Tim later told me he had had lots of misgivings – about many things – when we set about our task that day. He had also read all the oldtime-hunters' warnings about the dangers that supposedly accompanied the shooting of cow elephants. He had been equally concerned about how he would, personally, handle the killing of the babies. So the apparently nonchalant Tim Braybrooke I saw that morning was not quite so blasé about what we were about to do as his outward demeanor projected.*

We heard the elephants long before we saw them. The cows were perpetually growling, talking to each other and to their offspring. Every now and again a baby squealed when its mother cuffed it with her trunk for some or other misdemeanor.

They were spread out and feeding in the heavy forest undergrowth when we caught up with them. There was the constant sound of saplings being broken, of leaves being shuffled about, and the crunching, chewing sounds that elephants make when they are feeding.

Tim looked the herd over with expert eyes. All we could see were the adults and the sub-adults in the group. The babies and smaller elephants were all hidden in the dense foliage closer to the ground. I counted. There seemed to be five big cows and five or six sub-adults in the herd.

"I reckon there must be at least twenty animals in the group," Tim said

finally. *"Maybe a couple more. We'll never be able to count them all in this thick bush. The babies are all hidden away in the shrubbery."*

"I came to the same conclusion," I told him. *"About twenty, maybe a couple more."*

"Are you ready?" Tim asked me. I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows affirmatively. I nodded. I guess I was as ready as I was ever going to be.

"*Ready?"* Tim asked Japan.

The Bushman shook his head. *"If you want to kill all these elephants,"* Japan said to Tim sagely, *"we're going to have to wait a bit before we start shooting."* He paused. Then he continued. *"They are all spread out feeding at the moment and we really need them to be all together. We need to wait until about one or two o'clock when the sun is really hot. Then they will all be at their siesta. They will all be clumped up together. Most of them will be asleep. That is the time we should start to shoot them."*

Tim looked at Japan, surprise written all over his face. He then looked at me. *"He's right you know,"* Tim said to me excitedly. *"He's exactly right. That is exactly what we are going to have to do."*

"Well done, Japan," Tim congratulated his tracker. *"Well done. So you are not just a pretty face…"* The Bushman did not understand one little bit of what Tim had just said except, perhaps, the words '*well done*'. Nevertheless, he grinned at Tim and he bobbed his head up and down in response.

It was moments like this that made me appreciate the value of a good tracker. Tim and Japan were a solid team and Japan's contribution to the hunt that day made me understand fully why Tim bound to him so tightly. I didn't particularly like Japan. He was aloof and arrogant. Our haloes just did not merge. But I now fully understood why he was Tim's personal tracker and why he was Tim's constant companion in the field. Bruce had exactly the same relationship with his tracker, Sumbe, and it persisted even though Bruce rarely hunted now.

There and then I pondered my own situation. I still did not have a personal tracker. I was drawn to Mbuyotsi very much. He was outgoing with good leadership potential. He was pleasant to work with. We had become good friends over the last few months.

Ben, on the other hand, was taciturn and introverted. It was difficult to converse with him. But I had to admit I was beginning to appreciate the fact that Ben was a very much better tracker than Mbuyotsi. And, with some

mischievous glee, the thought went through my mind that he was also a better tracker than Japan.

Nevertheless, what Tim had said was true. Japan's advice that day was sound. We were on new territory. Nobody had hunted cowherds in Hwange before. We were all learning.

This was the first hunt of a breeding herd of elephants that Tim had ever undertaken. It was my first such experience, too. Up till then Tim had tackled only bulls – mostly crop-raiding bulls – and, with him, so had I. We had shot the bulls however and wherever we found them. If they were spread out feeding we went in and shot those we were able to shoot. This normally amounted to just one or two and we had been satisfied with that number. When they were together, resting, we shot two or three. No matter what the circumstances, after the first contact and shooting, we chased the rest until we caught up with them. Then we shot some more.

We had never before purposefully waited until the elephants went to ground for their midday siesta. For both of us Japan's idea that day was a novel one. It was to change our elephant hunting patterns for the rest of our lives.

Japan's remarkable advice that day made us learn all about the elephants' daytime habits. We took special cognizance of their regular predilection for a nap during the heat of the day. We discovered this applied to both cows and bulls. Thereafter, we married our hunting practices to these behaviour patterns. And our hunting scores soared.

Readers must understand that this was not a game we were playing. This was not a sport. This was a job of work we had to do and 'numbers' reflected how well we did it.

We retired from the herd and moved into a downwind position. The breeze was surprisingly constant so we were in no danger of having our nearby presence discovered. We sat down and leant our backs against teak tree trunks and we talked about many things in soft undertones. Everybody listened to the herd feeding noisily in the distant background.

I lay down flat on the sand, placed a dead log under my neck, stretched out and dozed off for a while.

When I returned to the world I found Tim and Japan talking earnestly. Tim looked at me and he smiled. *"Have a good kip?"* he asked in jest. I smiled back, shook my head to waken up, and I sat up.

"The jumbos have moved off," Tim said laconically. I listened. There was now no sound of them feeding. *"They've moved off to their siesta place – I think,"* he continued. *"We'll pick them up again easily enough."*

We walked quietly back to the place where we had left the elephants. There were yesterday's-today's-and-tomorrow's tracks everywhere. Japan and Ben took up the spoor. The elephants had moved off as a group with their noses not quite into the wind. They seemed to have moved quite fast and in a determined fashion. I was concerned that they might have picked up our scent.

"No," Tim assured me when I broached the subject. *"I am sure they are just moving off to a place where they want to rest up during the heat of the day."*

Japan and Ben continued on the spoor. Tim and I followed. The trackers carried our rifles.

An hour later the trackers stopped suddenly. They cast their heads to one side – listening. Japan turned round to Tim and pointed ahead. The elephants were at rest about one hundred yards ahead of us. When I listened I, too, could hear them. Soft sounds told me the elephant's ears were wafting and slapping gently against their shoulders. There was no more growling or squealing.

I took out my ash bag and shook it gently. A cloud of white dust spread out into the air in front of me. It drifted slowly from my front right to my left rear. It was moving just as it had done before. *"The wind is O.K.,"* Tim stated the obvious.

Tim turned then, retrieved his rifle, and moved ahead taking the lead from Japan. Japan pulled out a packet of twenty .375 cartridges from the breast pocket of his khaki shirt, slipping the inside sleeve out to reveal the bright shine of new brass inside. I walked behind Japan. Ben handed me my rifle and walked on just behind. Ben, too, had a packet of cartridges in his left hand.

Both Tim and I had our cartridge belts around our waists each with 25 rounds in the loops. *We sure aren't going to run short of ammunition,* I thought.

As Japan had foreseen, the elephants were dozing on their feet in the shade of two big *mchibis,* false teak trees that had thick and heavy dark green foliage.

The elephants were bunched up, almost leaning against each other. Their

heads were hanging, the ends of their trunks lazily lying on the ground. They were swaying about in various states of heavy somnolence. Their eyes were shut or drooping and their ears were flapping desultorily as if by their own volition. The younger animals were all mixed-in with the bigger ones. Some of the calves were lying on their sides on the ground.

"We take out the biggest ones first," Tim instructed me in a hoarse whisper. *"That should be easy. There are only four or five very big cows in the group. Then we scale down to the smallest ones. Shoot as fast as you can but make sure of your shots. Every shot must count. O.K?"* I nodded.
"Right then. I'll take the big cows on the left." Tim said quietly.
"You choose from the ones on the right."

We moved apart, slightly flanking the herd from a downwind position. I took my cues from Tim. He moved closer and closer – dangerously close, I thought. I followed suit. I was constantly conscious of the fact that we had not done this before. Even Tim didn't know what was going to happen when we started shooting.

We were no more than fifteen paces from the nearest elephant when one of the young bulls in the herd lifted its head and looked directly at Tim. That it had seen him there was no doubt. It changed its position and, with head held high and with its ears erect, it peered down its nose at the human intruder. It growled softly in alarm.

At the sound of the growl all the big cows lifted their heads. Tim lifted his rifle and pumped a bullet into the young bull's face. It dropped like a stone.

My mind was full of all Tim's training advice. Go for the brain. All other targets are secondary. Draw a line between the ear hole and the eye.
Aim one-third forward of the ear hole. Squeeze the trigger.

My first bullet sent a big cow to the ground. Tim killed another. After that I don't know what happened or who shot what. After the first shot, all my bullets seemed to find the brain automatically. Maybe that was because all these cow elephants' heads were miniscule by comparison to those of the big bulls we had been shooting up till that day.

The surviving elephants were suddenly fully awake. They began milling around. The bigger ones growled. The smaller ones crowded around the bigger ones' legs. They were all bewildered and looking for protection. With all the big cows down in the first fearsome fusillade there was none to provide leadership.

The rifle fire was rapid. The bullets flew hard and fast. The herd fanned out a little but they fell like nine-pins in a bowling alley.

Neither Tim nor I touched a single cartridge in our belts. Our two trackers fed us fresh cartridges from the boxes in their hands – holding them, two at a time, to the front and to the right hand side of our faces. We snatched at the ammunition eagerly, punching the new shells into the magazines. The shooting sounded like a war zone. It was all over in less than one minute.

The killing of the baby calves was carried out without hesitation, with total professionalism and with absolute proficiency. If they were on their feet we shot them. When they were down they were then most certainly dead.

When the shooting was over we stood and looked at each other in stunned bewilderment. Nobody said a word. Everybody was wrapped up in their own thoughts. Each of us had our own ideas about the slaughter we had just performed.

Inadvertently I touched the barrel of my rifle. It was red hot. My fingers almost blistered.

The trackers went about their task of cutting off the elephants' tails silently. There were twenty-two tails in all.

"Count the tusks," Tim instructed Japan. *"Count the number of bulls and the number of cows,"* he told Ben. The trackers did as Tim had commanded.

"Let's check the numbers ourselves," Tim said to me after a few moments. *"Bruce will want to know all the figures."*

When we had done everything that we needed to do Tim and I, and our two trackers, sat for a while resting on the shoulders of four of the larger carcasses. The whole herd was scattered all around us. Most of their bodies were touching. One or two were further out from the main group.

Shooting out the cowherd had been easy. Much easier than we had believed was possible. Both Tim and I had had severe reservations about tackling the cows. Our minds were pre-occupied with all the old hunters' stories from the nineteenth century – but we had encountered not one dangerous moment. Our twenty-two elephants had all died in less than one minute! It hardly seemed possible. But the carcasses that lay around us were proof of the fact.

Suddenly there was a commotion behind us. Out of the bush came a young bull elephant. He rushed out into the open amidst all the carnage, took a look around, then he turned and high-tailed it back into the same part of the bush from which he had emerged. We had no time to snatch up a rifle and

shoot him. It had been a brief and unexpected visitation. We realised then that he must have been part of the herd. He must have escaped into the heavy undergrowth when the shooting started.

"Landa," Tim demanded of Japan. *Follow it.* Tim, rifle in hand, was already on the young bull's tracks looking down at the spoor.

We followed that young elephant all over the teak forest for the rest of the afternoon. We flushed him several times but he never gave us a chance to get anywhere near him. He often stood and waited for us to approach then he turned and raced off again into the leafy brush. An hour before dark we broke off the hunt and returned to camp. It had by then become clear that he was not going to let us get within shooting range.

We spent a week in that region of Tjolotjo during which time we killed another eight bull elephants and a single buffalo. Bruce had told Tim that he wanted us back at Main Camp by the weekend. This we obligingly managed to do. The following week Bruce wanted us both to assist him with a new game capture operation on the Ngamo plains. This time the bulk of the game animals were to go to Lake McIllwaine National Park just outside Salisbury. One load of zebra – containing another two stallions – went to the Matopos.

* * *

Over the next month several Bulawayo newspapers published stories about a young elephant that had suddenly pitched up at Nymandhlovu village – located half way between Bulawayo city and Ngamo. Then it was seen on the northwestern outskirts of the city itself. A day or two later it appeared just south of the city. Then it was parading through the Figtree farming area well to the south of Bulawayo. The last that was heard of the elephant was when it raided some gardens north of Marula. After that it headed west towards the Nata River. It seemed most people presumed the elephant was going home to Hwange.

There were many extravagant claims in the newspapers to explain this young elephant's epic journey. It was likened to Huberta, a hippo that had wandered along the South African coast from northern Natal to the Keiskama River, near King Williams Town, in the Eastern Cape. There the hippo had been shot by a farmer after it raided his irrigated croplands. Speculation was rife that the now famous elephant wanderer of Matabeleland had met a similar fate.

Tim and I followed those newspaper reports with a great deal of amusement. We were both convinced that the wandering elephant was none other than the surviving young bull we had pursued all afternoon following the elimination of its parental herd. We, of course, did not enlighten the newspapers in any way. To have done so would most likely have caused a major public outcry.

* * *

The game holding pens at Ngamo were dishevelled when we arrived at the capture camp. The msusu poles from which they had been constructed twelve months before were sound enough but they had dried out and shrunk in diameter. It was a simple matter, however, just to twist-tighten the 8-gauge wire Spanish-windless fastenings with a length of steel bar.
Within an hour all the pens were as good as new.

We constructed a rough tarpaulin-roofed shelter and stored the lorryload of dry lucerne bales we had brought along under its canvas roof.

Two five-ton lorries were due to arrive from Lake McIllwaine National Park at the end of the week. So our large native labour force, under Mbuyotsi's supervision, became active cutting msusu poles from the edge of the nearby teak forest. Our Main Camp lorry brought the poles into camp and everybody became engaged in constructing the pole panels that would make up the sides of the crates that would be erected on the McIllwaine trucks.

We stripped down our two government Land Rovers, removing the cab roofs, removing the doors, removing the tailgates and laying the windscreens flat over the vehicle's bonnets. This did not take long to do.

The trackers went out and cut long vangstoks – strong yet thin and whippy bushpoles – which would carry the cotton lassoes. The vangstoks came from regrowth saplings that grew out from the lateral trunks of *mtechani (Combretum hereroensi)* trees that the elephants had previously pushed over. The trackers removed the bark and split the ends of the sticks with a knife. Then they tightly wrapped a ring of eight-gauge wire around the stem six inches back from the spilt. The wire rings stopped the poles from splitting further and they gave some bite to the wood when the half-inch cotton rope was forced between the spilt end.

The vangstoks were one of the more important parts of our capture equipment. They carried the cotton rope lassoes the loops of which hung from the ends of the long light poles. When the loops of the lassoes were in place the rest of the rope was loosely wound around the stick to stop it flying

wild in the chase. The thick ends of the poles, *and* the ends of the ropes, were held by the trackers on the back of the Land Rover.

The capture technique was simple. When a herd of animals came out onto the flat open plain, two Land Rovers raced out and pursued them as they fled the scene. Four trackers sat in the back of each Land Rover each one with a vangstok and rope lassoo in his hands – two on each side of the vehicle. The vangstoks were at first held erect. They then looked like four flimsy flags flying from the back of the vehicle. Bruce or Harry, Tim or I, were always the drivers of the Land Rovers.

In pursuit of the game we closed the gap as quickly as possible until the Land Rover was travelling right alongside a running animal. The ideal position was when its buttocks were level with one of the front wheels. The nearest tracker then lowered his vangstok until the lassoo noose was hanging just behind the running animals back legs. Waiting for the right moment the tracker whipped the vangstok forwards flicking the hanging lassoo noose under one of the animal's descending back legs. He then yanked the vangstok upwards and the noose tightened about the animal's leg. The vangstok was then dropped and the end of the cotton rope was held tightly in the tracker's hand.

The driver slowed the vehicle down gently as the captured animal fought the rope. All the trackers then jumped out of the vehicle and pulled the animal down by hand. They quickly secured its legs with short tie-ropes and the man who had caught the animal in the first place was left alone on the open plain to guard and to placate his captive. The vehicle, with the other three trackers back on board, then raced off after the herd again to capture a second animal.

The end of the chase came about when either four animals had been caught, or when the running herd escaped into the thick msusu scrub that grew on the edge of the surrounding teak forest. This kind of capture would not have been possible but for the existence of the flat and very open Ngamo plain. It was two miles wide and two miles long with only a smattering of big lead wood trees and a few small thickets of mtechani bushes, growing on it.

Sometimes the capture was accomplished when the running animal moved sideways and bumped its buttocks onto the moving vehicle's mudguard. The driver, or a passenger sitting next to him on the other side, was then able to reach out and grab the animal's tail. This was just as effective as a lassoo capture and the animals were then properly secured by

the eager hands of the trackers in just the same manner.

We normally considered ourselves lucky if, with one Land Rover, we captured two animals in one chase. Just one was good enough. Sometimes we caught four. Every time we went for giraffe our intention was to capture only one. When we went after buffalo, zebra or wildebeest our target was four.

What we caught depended on what species and sexes we wanted. How many of each animal we caught at any one time depended on the size of the herd, which way they ran, what species they were, how old they were, and what sexes were available. Some species of animals ran fast and furiously with lots of energy and stamina. Others, like buffalo, loped along ponderously.

When the essential chores were finished in camp, much of our time was spent lounging around waiting for the animals to come out onto the plain. The trackers kept themselves busy repairing vangstoks and ropes. The labour gang fed and watered the animals in the pens. The drivers attended to the vehicles. But mostly we waited.

The trackers built a small platform in one of the trees – *'the crow's nest'* we called it – and the native staff took turns manning it. From there they were able to watch the entire plain and they gave us early warning of the approach of animals coming to the water.

Tim and I took turns wandering about the camp checking on the boys, making sure everything was going according to plan. Making sure none of them were loafing when there were important things to be done. Most of the time, however, everybody just rested; and we waited. The capture camp was very laid back!

All the time music played quietly from a transistor radio that was hung on a wire hook secured to one of the holding pens' pole walls. It was amazing how the constant playing of the radio calmed down even the most recently captured animals.

The whole camp, including the capture pens, was hidden from view behind a screen of green trees and bushes. Animals approaching the water could see nothing of the camp. The single large pan, full of water, was located just beyond this natural barrier. So when the animals reached the water we let them drink and when they turned to walk back across the plain they had two miles of flat, open ground to traverse before they reached safety in the far away teak forest.

We had some interesting moments.

On one occasion Bruce, with all his merry men on board, raced his Land Rover in a long shallow curve along the interface between the open plain and the heavy teak forest. His purpose was to cut off the flight of a nice young giraffe from its escape route into the gusu. He was concentrating on watching the giraffe when his Land Rover, at a break neck speed, charged over a wide and shallow anthill.

The anthill was shaped like a large flat saucer that had been placed upside down on the ground. It measured ten yards across and two feet high. It was, therefore, just a flattish hump on the ground. It was no impediment to the Land Rover no matter how fast it was travelling.

From the angle that he had approached the anthill, Bruce could not see that on its far side the elephants had dug a large wide hole. This was not uncommon because elephants and other game find traces of salt and other minerals in the soil that the termites bring to the surface from somewhere deep down in the ground. The holes that animals dig into anthills, therefore, are important mineral licks.

This hole was sufficiently deep to accept both the Land Rover's front wheels whilst just letting the bumper carry over the top. The edge of the hole against which the wheels impacted was not high but it was vertical.

Bruce raced over the top of the anthill oblivious to the hidden obstacle on the far side. All the while he kept his eyes on the running giraffe.

I was in another Land Rover some distance away on the giraffe's far side. I was watching Bruce's attempts to cut it off and I was cruising along quite slowly. I, too, had no knowledge about the existence of the hole.

Racing hell bent for leather over the top of the anthill, Bruce's Land Rover came to a sudden stop. There was no slowing down. There was no bouncing about. One second the Land Rover was racing along at high speed, the next it hit the solid wall of the hole and it came to an abrupt stop.

The back of the vehicle tipped upwards and forward, *almost* somersaulting over its front wheels. But it didn't. It dropped back onto the anthill.

Bruce, and the four trackers who had been sitting on the back decking, their vangstoks still clutched in their hands, went flying through the air. They travelled as a group but they hit the ground in a splatter according to what their positions had been in the vehicle.

"Agh… Agh…" Ben and Mbuyotsi uttered their amazement and concern. They were the first two trackers with vangstoks sitting on either side of the

decking behind me in my Land Rover.

A smile ran across my face. The whole episode had been hilarious to watch. The smile quickly disappeared, however, when I suddenly realised that we could have some serious injuries on our hands.

The giraffe was forgotten. It galloped past me on its way into the teak. I revved the engine of my vehicle and hurried over to the accident scene.

What I saw came as a great relief. As I drew up next to the stricken Land Rover, one by one, each of the vehicle's passengers lifted himself out of the dust. They all rose to their feet without assistance.

The first to get up was Bruce. The sweat-wetted back of his shirt was coated with a thick layer of brown dust. *"Damn"* he said to nobody in particular.

He walked over to the Land Rover and got down on one knee to examine its undercarriage. *"I didn't see the bloody hole." "Are you O.K.?"* I asked him tentatively.

"Yes… I think so," he said shakily. *"I can't feel any broken bones."* Then he looked at me and he smirked. He shook his head in disbelief. I turned to the Bushmen. *"And you guys. Are you O.K.?"*

Mbuyotsi said something in his Bushman language to the four surviving trackers. He began laughing. I haven't a clue what it was he said to them but they smiled back at him sheepishly. Sumbe, one of the four crash victims, looked at his three comrades before responding to my question. *"Yes, Nkosana,"* he said politely. *"We are all O.K."*

Bruce climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. It burst into life and purred away beautiful. *"The engine work's O.K.,"* he said to me with raised eyebrows. He depressed the clutch and put the gear into reverse. The Land Rover backed out of the hole obediently. *"Seems O.K."* he said to me happily.

"O.K… You trackers," Bruce commanded imperiously. *"Get in the back."*

The four Bushmen recovered their vangstoks and lassoes from the dust and they climbed into the back of the Land Rover. Bruce drove them straight back to camp. I tagged on behind.

Everyone in that Land Rover had been very lucky. Not one injury! *That* was unbelievable.

Back in camp Harry gave the vehicle a thorough inspection. He discovered that, on the right hand side, the big U-bolts that attached the front

axle to the springs had been bent and buckled, and that the bolts on the rear section had sheared off completely. He pronounced the vehicle unserviceable.

Harry immediately sent Main Camp's senior native driver, Munene, back to Main Camp that very same afternoon. The distance was eighty miles. Munene was back in the capture camp by midnight with new Ubolts. By breakfast time the next day Harry had the Land Rover back in service.

* * *

We had a photographer-cum-newsreel cameramen with us on this operation. He had been foisted on us by the Ministry of Information so we had no option but to accommodate him. I cannot now remember his name. His job was to capture, on film, the essence of the game capture operation.

The cameraman was very full of himself and, from the very first night in camp, he regaled us with stories about his making of what he believed were several very successful news documentaries.

Harry was a very keen and accomplished amateur photographer. He picked the brains of anybody and everybody who could advance his knowledge about taking and developing photographs. He even had his own dark room back at Main Camp. I was not surprised, therefore, when Harry and our vociferous guest struck up a good rapport.

Harry did two things for his friend the cameraman. He rigged up a mounting on the back corner of one of the capture Land Rovers to which he fixed a movie camera. This camera was specifically focused to catch close ups of the lassoing of the animals' back legs.

Harry also bolted the cameraman's wooden theodolite tripod onto the flat metal decking on the same Land Rover. This tripod was equipped to carry the cameraman's big 16 mm movie camera.

The movie shots the cameraman got of the capture operation, from these two mountings, were phenomenal.

There is more, however, to the story of our intrepid cameraman!

Many groups of elephants came out onto the Ngamo plains in the evenings after we had finished capturing for the day. The cameraman asked Harry if he could possibly arrange for an elephant to charge the Land Rover so that he could film the action right into the camera's lens. Harry said that could be done. In fact, he said, it was not a difficult task at all.

Harry was conscious of the fact, however, that to get the shot the cameraman wanted, they would have to confront the elephants close up in a

stripped-down Land Rover. The occupants of the vehicle would therefore have no material protection around them. Consequently, he asked me to hover about in the background, in a second Land Rover, with a rifle at the ready. I was happy to oblige. I made Mbuyotsi comfortable in the passenger seat there to hold my rifle.

Harry knew exactly what he was doing with elephants. I had seen him many times getting them to do exactly what he wanted for the purpose of obtaining a particular photograph. I had no doubt, therefore, that the cameraman was about to get some excellent footage.

That evening a particularly big group of elephants were half way across the plains, moving towards the water, when Harry confronted them in the Land Rover. The big matriarch stood her ground. She growled at Harry, warning him to keep his distance. Then she screamed abuse at the seemingly unimpressed game ranger. Harry read all the signs.

"*Keep your eye on that big cow,*" he warned the photographer. "*She is the one that is going to come at us.*" The cameraman eased himself behind his big newsreel camera and waited for the fun to begin.

The big matriarch shook her head, banging her ears against her shoulders. Harry pointed the Land Rover in her direction and revved the engine. Down came the old cow's head and, suddenly, she was in a fullblown charge racing full bore towards the Land Rover.

Harry stood his ground. The combined display of no fear and the loud revving of the vehicle's engine normally caused a charging cow elephant to think twice about pushing through her attack. I was learning that cow elephants were full of bluster and that most of their attacks turned into mock charges.

The big cow came on. Harry revved the engine, louder and longer this time. Still the cow came on. Harry then knew *this* elephant meant business. He pushed the gear lever into reverse and started to move backwards away from the oncoming elephant.

Without warning the engine spluttered and conked out.

Harry turned the ignition key and tried to restart the engine. *Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya…* went the starter motor. The battery was turning the engine over but the old lady refused to cooperate.

Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya…

The elephant reached the stranded and now stationary Land Rover. There she stopped. For a long moment she stood right in front of the vehicle looking

down at its hapless occupants.

Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya…

Harry looked the old matriarch in the eye. He was now within easy reach of her trunk and there was nothing – no protection at all – between the two of them. He continued with his attempts to restart the motor.

Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya...

The elephant pushed the vehicle tentatively with the front part of her trunk. Then she trumpeted, lifted her trunk high and banged it down onto the Land Rover's bonnet.

"DON'T, WHATEVER YOU DO, LEAVE THE VEHICLE," Harry shouted at the cameraman.

Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya…

At this stage of the game I began to get worried. I couldn't properly see what was going on between the vehicle and the elephant because I was then fifty yards away directly behind Harry's Land Rover. I did not hear Harry's warning to the cameraman.

I thought to myself: *Harry's gone a bit too far this time.*

I did not know the engine had spluttered out. Then I heard Harry's continuous and unsuccessful attempts to get the motor running.

Waya… Waya… Waya… Waya…

I stepped on the petrol and raced out to the side of the unfolding drama. Only then did I see what was really going on.

The old cow took a step back and she dropped her head. She came at the Land Rover again. This time she hit the front of the vehicle full on with her rolled-up trunk, her tusks pushing two great holes through the radiator's complex of copper pipes. Hot water and steam spouted out all over the elephant's face.

And she pushed…

The cameraman, at this stage, was lying flat on the vehicle's rear deck trying to make himself invisible. He was hanging on grimly to the tripod's bolted-down legs.

What I saw was not good news. Something had gone horribly wrong with Harry's plan. I stood on the accelerator and rushed at the attacking elephant from the side, revving my engine wildly. She was now totally absorbed with pushing Harry's vehicle around. I smacked my front bumper hard onto her back leg. The thump was hard enough to bend the metal. She ignored me flat.

I backed off and took the rifle out of Mbuyotsi's hands, snapping the safety off.

The elephant pushed… and it pushed. Its forward momentum gathered speed. So did the Land Rover's speed in reverse.

In the driver's seat Harry held the gear lever in reverse and took his foot off the clutch. The Land Rover jerked and coughed and spluttered. Suddenly the engine burst into life and Harry backed off hurriedly from the elephant. He raced away backwards across the open plain.

Separated now, the elephant stopped her attack. She stood still and she watched the retreating Land Rover. She held her head up high, her two long tusks standing erect. Her eyes were wild. Her blood was up. She looked at me sideways as I hurriedly backed away from her.

I threw the rifle back into Mbuyotsi's hands. *"Fakka safe,"* I shouted at him. *Put it on safe.* I don't think he heard me. He did not put the weapon on safe and he made himself ready to shoot.

There was no time to remonstrate. I pushed the nose of my Land Rover between the elephant and Harry's vehicle which had started to splutter again. By then my Land Rover had become the elephant's target.

Confusion reigned. Amidst it all Mbuyotsi ejected the round that was already in the chamber and he rammed another one up the spout. The rifle was once again fully cocked and ready to fire. The Bushman again prepared himself to shoot the old cow.

"NO…." I shouted at him. *"DON'T SHOOT."*

I charged dangerously close to the now vibrantly angry elephant, spinning my wheels directly under her nose. She smacked the side of the Land Rover with her trunk. The vehicle lifted, jumped sideways with the impact, and bounced back onto the ground. I raced away from the angry old lady.

The old cow now turned on me in earnest. She began chasing me across the open plain, all the time chuntering muttered trumpets as she ran along. I kept ahead of her, all the time remaining close enough to maintain her interest. She chased me with everything she had. Slowly I turned her round and guided her back towards the herd which was now high-tailing it back into the teak forest. When I felt sure I had properly diverted her attention, I accelerated away in a wide curve.

I looked back and saw her standing defiantly in my dust. The episode

was over. I stopped my Land Rover and looked across the open plain at the angry old cow. She shook her head violently and banged her giant ears against her shoulders. Then she turned and hurriedly ran back towards where her herd had already run back into the security of the forest. A pall of dust hung in the air where the last of her family had disappeared amongst the trees.

I watched her running until she disappeared into the tree line. I noted that, even in her fast and running departure, she always had three feet on the ground at any one time. She never had more than one foot off the ground – ever – even when she was running.

I had noted this phenomenon many times before, but as I watched the old matriarch running away that evening it made me think back to my recent elephant-hunting training-days with Tim. He had made me aware of this fact. I remembered him saying that an elephant cannot even *walk* on three legs.

I smiled at the recollection – a fond memory of a time that was not so long ago. And I was happy that the spunky old elephant cow had come to no harm.

I quickly rode over the open ground to where Harry had the bonnet of his vehicle open. He had his head beneath the lid and was examining the engine. I was just in time to see him rip off the air filter and chuck it onto the vacant passenger seat.

"*Damn thing,"* Harry cursed.

The cameraman was standing up behind his camera on the back of the vehicle now. He was silent. His face was ashen gray. His hands were shaking visibly. Just that one glance told me he was still in a state of shock.

"*What happened?"* I asked Harry.

"The inner lining of the air filter hose shook loose," he explained. *"It's a plasticised fabric. It fell over the top of the carburetor's air intake and choked it."*

The radiator on Harry's vehicle was kaput. Nobody was going to repair those two big tusk holes in a hurry. All the water had drained out of the engine and it would have been foolhardy and negligent to drive the vehicle in that condition. Except for the two tusk holes through the radiator, however, there was nothing wrong with the engine.

I returned to camp and retrieved a cotton lassoo rope. With it I towed Harry's ailing Land Rover back to camp.

The next day Harry removed the damaged radiator and he returned with

it to Main Camp. At Main camp he recovered the radiator from another Land Rover that was standing behind the workshop waiting for a gearbox replacement. Our government vehicles were all serviced by C.M.E.D. – the Central Mechanical Equipment Department – who were often very tardy in their attention to our transport needs.

We were, officially, not allowed to touch any government vehicle that had broken down, but had we heeded that instruction we would have had to rely on our horse and mules for transportation. Harry had the stricken Land Rover back in operation that same afternoon. So we were back in full business the very next day.

To rub salt into the wound, it transpired that our wonderful cameraman had been too petrified to press the camera's operating button when the elephant attacked the Land Rover. His mind and his hand had frozen no sooner than had the elephant begun its charge. He had recorded not one single frame of the whole incident. He was never the same person again. The aura of bravado that had encompassed his persona when he arrived had evaporated in one instant of time.

Two days later our cameraman informed us that he had enough film to satisfy his needs. That same afternoon he left the camp in his own Land Rover with his tail clamped firmly between his legs. He couldn't get back to his safe office in one of Salisbury's skyscraper buildings, soon enough. I, for one, was glad to see him go. Nobody voiced an opinion on the subject so I guess everybody else felt the same way.

* * *

There is another interesting tale to tell about the 1961 game capture operations at Ngamo. It concerned a problem that we had foreseen in 1960 – when we had first caught game for the Matopos. The problem, however, had not come to anything that year so we had all relegated the issue to the back recesses of our minds.

Some very big buffalo herds came down to drink at the pan in the early evenings and we raced our stripped down Land Rovers in amongst them selecting and catching half-grown animals at will. The buffalo were big lumbering beasts that gave us all the time in the world to seek out and to catch the best animals amongst them, and in the right sex combinations. This was exciting work. Sitting in our very exposed situations on the stripped down Land Rovers, we were all the time surrounded by a mass of these huge

and dangers animals.

The front echelons of the herd, as they were lumbering away across the open plain, kept very much together whilst all the capture work was going on behind them. They split apart occasionally, loping off cumbersomely as they fled towards the far away teak forest. Then they drifted together again and reformed into the mass of one big herd.

As they ran along, and as we rode amongst them, the sweet smell of buffalo dung and of pungent urine swamped our senses. Over our heads swarms of oxpeckers twittered and churred in alarm; and the buffaloes' galloping hooves stirred up a mass of thick and choking dust. Sometimes it was difficult to see more than a few buffalo ahead of us so thick was the dust.

We had to watch out for those buffalo that sometimes turned back and attacked the Land Rovers. Being attacked by buffaloes was the problem that had concerned us the previous year! We had to be conscious of the possibility of attack all the time. Our eyes had to be everywhere, looking for the animals we wanted to catch whilst, at the same time, we had to keep an eye on those big bulls that were loping along, watching us out of the corners of their eyes, as we raced passed them in the dust.

Our capture technique was just the same for buffalo as it was for all the other game animals. We lassoed – or caught by the tail – the animal of our choice and we pulled it slowly to a halt. The trackers then jumped off the Land Rover and surrounded it on foot. They wrestled and pulled the animal to the ground by hand and fastened its four legs together with tie-ropes.

Whilst we were pulling our captives to the ground, those buffaloes that had been behind us passed us by. They ran on in the thick dust of the main herd that was often well to the front of them. Most of the big bulls showed no interest in what we were doing to the animals we had captured. They simply skirted round us and ran on.

When we had an animal down and roped, one tracker stayed with it. The others climbed back on board and we set off to capture another. And we overtook again the big bulls that had so recently run passed us from behind.

Buffalo tire easily when they have to run *en masse* in the face of danger. The ones that tired the most were the biggest of the adult bulls because they are much heavier than the cows. They also carry immensely heavy horns and huge bosses on massive muscular necks. The cows are not encumbered with these weighty burdens.

By the time the main body of the blundering stampede was half way

across the wide Ngamo plain, therefore, the herd had stratified. The cows and the juveniles were in the lead and the very big bulls lagged behind.

This was what concerned us the most, the big bulls that lagged behind!

Towards the end of the race, the two Land Rovers had left all the big bulls far behind. The drivers were then busily occupied diving in and out of the cows and juveniles near to the front. All along the way, the Bushmen lassoed whatever half-grown animal they wanted. And every time, once the animal had been hog-tied, one Bushman was dropped off in the dust to guard it. *That* was the routine.

Sooner or later, therefore, the biggest bulls in the herd would come lumbering past each of the captured animals and their Bushman guards. The big bulls trailed the main herd often by two hundred yards or more. So, by the time they reached the Bushmen who were on guard with their captives, the air was starting to clear of dust. The waiting trackers then stood out like sore thumbs on the wide-open plain. They were, therefore, in great and constant danger. If just one of those tired and angry old bulls decided to sort one of them out, the tracker had nowhere to run.

Those of us who were in the Land Rovers catching more buffaloes up front were normally totally oblivious to whatever danger threatened the lone trackers behind us. Our minds were always occupied with other more immediate things, such as: *Which young buffalo do I catch next?*

The trackers were very aware of the danger. As the big bulls lumbered towards them, one by one the Bushmen lay down on the ground, hiding behind the bodies of their half-grown captives. They had no other option.

The big bulls came on. Most of them ignored the tied up and struggling young buffalo. Most of them did not even acknowledge the existence of the hiding Bushmen. They just swerved to avoid the obstacles in their paths and they lumbered on.

Eventually, the inevitable happened. One big bull did not just run past. It had another idea.

Harry had captured his fourth young buffalo and the last of his trackers had been left to guard the captive. It was always a hard struggle to get the last buffalo down and tied up because there was then just the game-ranger-driver, and one tracker, to wrestle the animal to the ground.

On this occasion, when what appeared to be the last of the herd had raced them by, Harry and the last tracker were left standing next to the Land Rover in a cloud of heavy dust. The buffalo they had just caught was down and hog-

tied.

Harry's eyes were streaming with tears – nature's remedy for dustclogged eyes. He choked every time he breathed. So he left the tracker with his buffalo and he climbed into the Land Rover. He just *had* to get out of the dust or he was going to choke to death. He drove rapidly off to the side getting himself quickly out of the cloying muck.

Once out of the dust cloud he drew in several big breaths of clean fresh air. The relief was huge. He was not going to die! Casually he looked back along the route they had followed. What he saw sent a chill down his spine.

Two hundred yards behind him, he saw a big buffalo bull tossing about the body of one of the captured young buffaloes. The animal's legs were still tied together, so it was completely at the big bull's mercy. It was just a big bundle of meat and bone, and it gave grand purchase to the hooking horns. Dodging around behind the twirling carcass was the tracker. Even at that distance Harry could see it was Sumbe.

Harry pushed the accelerator to the floor and raced back towards the scene. The big bull had its horns hooked between the captured animal's four tied legs and it was trying desperately to extricate itself from the predicament. Sumbe took advantage of the situation by high-tailing it across the open plain.

Just as Harry got there, the big buffalo pulled its horns free and, seeing the running figure of the tracker, it gave chase.

There was nowhere for Sumbe to go. Nowhere to hide! There was not even a small bush anywhere about. There was no hole into which he could crawl. All he could do was to run.

Only ten yards separated the charging buffalo and the running tracker when Harry drew up alongside it. He rammed the front side of the Land Rover into the animal's shoulder and he held the vehicle up against the buffalo's body, pushing it constantly sideways and away from its line of attack. The big bull slowed down then it turned on the Land Rover. With a powerful hook of its horn under the front mudguard, it lifted the whole front of the vehicle off the ground.

Harry hung grimly to the steering wheel. The Land Rover came back to earth with a heavy thump. This brought it to a sudden stop. The buffalo smashed into the Land Rover's side with its huge boss. Then it got one hook of its horns under the bottom edge of the superstructure. It lifted its head

high. The Land Rover tipped up and over. It came dangerously close to toppling onto its side. Harry still clung to the steering wheel. His life now depended on it. The Land Rover came back to earth with another heavy thump.

The Land Rover's engine was all the while still running, so when it righted itself this time, Harry rammed the vehicle into gear and tramped on the accelerator. The vehicle's wheels spun. It bucked forwards. The buffalo hit the rear-side of the vehicle, pushing its back end to one side. But by then Harry was racing forwards and away.

The buffalo chased the Land Rover in angry pursuit. Harry slowed down keeping the animal's horns just a few feet from the open tailgate. The buffalo kept coming. Harry steered the buffalo away, maneouvering its direction towards where the leaders of the running herd were now haring back into the teak forest. Then he gave foot and pulled away.

Circling round, Harry watched the buffalo standing alone and defiant on the open plain. Its head was high, its horns flashing, as it looked angrily at the now cruising around Land Rover. The animal's chest heaved with every breath. Then it turned and cantered slowly off in the direction of the receding dust cloud.

Harry raced over the plain to where a forlorn-looking Sumbe was now standing waiting. The tracker was dejected and frightened but he was, thankfully, uninjured. Only then did Harry smile.

"Haaaiiieeee…" Sumbe exclaimed as he climbed into the Land Rover's passenger seat. That was all he said. He sat still for a few moments and looked out across the open plain. Then he shook his head. He was visibly shaken.

Harry slapped him across the chest with the back of his hand. He reached over, pulled the Bushman towards him, and gave him a big bear hug. That gesture said a lot more than words could ever have done at that poignant moment.

Malindela's tracker now had another tale to tell around the campfire at night. The trackers always liked to increase their repertoire. This story was a good one!

Except for his injured pride Sumbe was none the worse for his experience.

* * *

Something more needs to be explained about these non-hunting big game stories. What needs to be said is that, even though nobody is injured and no animals are killed, every single encounter with an elephant, or a buffalo, or a lion – dangerous or not – conditioned the people involved just a little bit more. The more such adventures we game rangers and trackers experienced – the more contacts we had with all these animals – the more capable and the more confident we became during future dangerous hunting encounters.

* * *

There is one last story to tell about the game capture experiences of 1961. It concerns Sumbe again. He was incorrigible.

A small herd of sable had emerged from the teak forest onto the plain. It had probably been chased before because it was reluctant to come to the water. Looking through his binoculars Bruce could see three catchable youngsters amongst its number. He decided to try to get the herd to enter the middle of the plain by moving around and behind it.

Bruce and Harry, in two Land Rovers, drove out from the capture camp in the exact opposite direction to where the sable were standing.
Each Land Rover was staffed by four trackers, and each tracker carried a vangstok and a lassoo.

The sable did not see them leave because the Land Rovers disappeared into the msusu scrub behind the camp. They were also behind the screen of green vegetation that hid the camp from the open plain. I climbed into the crow's nest to see what the Land Rovers were doing.

After some time I saw both the Land Rovers edging their way along the far side of the plain. They stuck to the vegetative rim next to the msusu scrub. The big teak trees reared up behind them. The two vehicles unobtrusively meandered along, slowly working their way into position behind the sable.

The sable stood and watched the vehicles sliding in behind them. Through the binoculars I could see they were agitated. Suddenly they broke into a gallop and raced off at full speed back into the security of the gusu.

When the sable began running the two Land Rovers burst into action but they were too late. The sable had understood Bruce's intentions and they made good their escape.

When racing to cut the sable off, Bruce's Land Rover was in front. Suddenly a big black-maned lion burst out of the undergrowth. It pounded away in front of him across the open plain. Bruce caught up with it and quickly maneouvred his vehicle so that the lion was running in a catchable

position. Its bounding body was right alongside the front bumper on the driver's side. Its tail was within easy reach. Bruce stretched out his right hand and caught hold of the lion by its tail tuft.

That evening Bruce told us he had done this as a joke. His intention was merely to scare the hell out of the trackers.

In a flash, Sumbe, who was sitting directly behind Bruce, had his vangstok out and he dropped its lassoo noose directly over the lion's head. He lifted the vangstok skywards and secured the noose about the lion's neck. He began pulling on the rope.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bruce spluttered, swinging the vehicle out and away from the lion. The rope tightened. The lion turned to fight it, roaring fiercely all the while.

"Let it go… Let it go…" Bruce instructed the Bushman urgently. There were tones of fear, of panic and of agitation in Bruce's voice. Sumbe hung on. The lion was now static, the vehicle raced on, and the long cotton rope began running wildly through Sumbe's hands. Only when his hands began to burn did the tracker drop the rope.

The lion stood on its back legs and fought the now loose rope, roaring its head off. The Land Rover passed it by, moving off to the side.

The lion ran off grunting and chuntering, trailing the rope behind it.

"Bloody fool," Bruce shouted at his tracker. He turned in his seat to rebuke the little Bushman some more. What he saw changed his mind. Sumbe was rolling around in the back of the Land Rover laughing his head off. Tears were running down his cheeks. Bruce stopped his tirade in full flight. He looked to the front of the racing Land Rover and he shook his head. His stern countenance was quickly replaced with a knowing smile.

"He was pulling my pisser," Bruce said to us later that evening. *"The little monkey was pulling my pisser."*

Bruce at first feigned anger. Then his look of chagrin faded. It was replaced with a broad smile. The great Malindela had, in fact, really enjoyed the way his good and faithful Bushman tracker had turned the tables on him. Sumbe had turned the joke back onto the joker.

* * *

That year we sent a huge consignment of game animals to McIllwaine National Park. A ranger from McIllwaine came down with the trucks to

escort them back – just as I had done almost exactly one year before from the Matopos. Much the same numbers and species of animals went up to McIllwaine as had been sent down to the Matopos the previous year.

Mid-way through the capture exercise it was decided to send more game to the Matopos, too – essentially replacements for the animals that had been killed by leopards in 1960. Jurie Grobler sent his trucks up all equipped with new msusu pole crates – having seen how we had constructed them at Ngamo the previous year. This, of course, helped us immensely at Ngamo and I think it induced Bruce to send more animals down to the Matopos than had been requested.

We sent up to McIllwaine good breeding nuclei of giraffe, buffalo, wildebeest, zebra, eland and sable. Additional sable, wildebeest, zebra and eland went to the Matopos, and one truckload of three young giraffe.

Over the next few years we reinforced all these introductions with yet more animals from Ngamo – to both McIllwaine and the Matopos. And we completely restocked Kyle Game Reserve, an old Game Department sanctuary, near Fort Victoria, too.

* * *

Readers may, by now, be thinking that nobody was ever still at Main Camp. If that is what you think you would be right. Main Camp, Hwange, was a hive of activity and those of us who lived there during this period, under Bruce Austen's command, were never at a loose end. There was something of importance that always had to be done.

No sooner were we back at Main Camp, than Bruce decided I should go out again on another horse patrol. This was to be my second horse patrol in four months. I went through all the rigmarole of preparation that I had undergone in November. This time, however, I was not instructed to conduct a two week patrol, I was told the period was to be four weeks.

We left Main Camp early in March under much the same conditions that we had departed in November. Mbuyotsi was again the lead Bushman. He walked out front with the old bull-barrelled .375 Magnum Winchester, with it's a shiny hand-polished silver barrel, over his shoulder. The rest of us followed.

I rode immediately behind Mbuyotsi astride Ted Davison's old horse, Turk. Ben followed me with all my personal camping kit atop the pack mule Whisky. Kitso followed next leading the heavily packed mule, Brandy. After

Kitso came the donkey herd led by Rojas.

It was Rojas's job to follow the tracks left by the horse and mules. The backpacked donkey's followed him, chivvied along behind by 'what's-'is-name', a young apprentice tracker. He was the tail-endCharlie.

Our planned route this time was due south, and then to the east, of Main Camp. We travelled the first seven miles along the quiet tourist road towards Makwa Pan. About a mile before Makwa, we reached a large *mchibi* tree well known to Mbuyotsi. The tree was his signpost. There we diverted to the right.

For a while we wandered through teak forest heading in a westerly direction. Then we hit a very large elephant path that headed southwest. It came, the trackers told me, from Nymandhlovu Pan. Once on this path we never left it for the next three hours. We visited pans along the way that I had only heard about – Caterpillar, Dopi and Jambili.

Jambili was a big pan located in a wide grassy drainage line. There we unsaddled the horse, hobbled the horse and both the mules, and sent all the animals out to graze. Rojas took first duty as the horse guard.

> *The horse, mules and donkeys were all referred to by the Bushmen, collectively, as 'horses'*

The still hard ridge across my upper backside – earned during my last horse patrol four months before – had made itself manifest again during that first day's ride. The military saddle with which I had been supplied just did not fit my rear end at all. I knew from experience, however, that after three days I would feel no further pain. The ridge on my bum would by then be numb for the duration of the patrol.

There was no road anywhere near Jambili and despite its relative proximity to Main Camp nobody had yet visited the pan by motor vehicle.
We knew about it only because, over the years, it had become one of our many important destinations when on horse patrol.

Bruce had told me just prior to my departure that I was to take particular note of how we could construct Land Rover tracks into the pans that were on our visiting list. He had told Mbuyotsi the names of the pans he wanted us to visit.

The purpose of my patrol, this time, was very specific. I had to plot Land Rover routes into the pans we visited so that we could get borehole drilling equipment in to them. Subsequently, personnel from the Department of Water Affairs would be rigging pumps and engines, and/or windmills, over the new boreholes.

Hwange National Park was stirring. My specific task on this patrol was the first sign that major developments were about to take place.

The trackers laid out my camp bed and equipment, on top of my regular six foot by eight foot tarpaulin ground sheet. A mosquito net hung from a sapling pole above my bed, its ends all tucked in neatly around the mattress.

> *I eventually discovered that just the vision of a mosquito net hanging from its flimsy pole was something of a deterrent from attack by lions and hyenas in the middle of the night. When they approached to investigate the horses, they would sometimes sit for long periods of time watching the grey-white material waft in the breeze like a diaphanous shroud. I imagined that it worked better when there was a light breeze blowing – but I had no proof of that. So, even when there were no mosquitoes about, when I was on a horse patrol, I insisted that the pole be set in place at the head of my bed and that the slack mosquito net should be hung from it.*

That afternoon I slept on the bed, in the shade of a big mcitamuzi tree, *(Lonchocarpus capassa)* for over an hour. Mbuyotsi woke me midafternoon.

Mbuyotsi and I did our customary foot patrol far out around the camp in the afternoon. We travelled for some distance down the drainage line, too. The tracker told me everything he knew about the pan and its surrounds, and what game made use of it.

The pan was full to the brim with rain water, as were several smaller pans further down the vlei. There were ducks of all descriptions swimming on all these waters – big adult ducks, and some adults with little ones swimming along behind. And there were a number of large young ducks at the stage where they were just about ready to fly. The breeding season for the ducks that year had been good.

"On this patrol we eat ducks," Mbuyotsi said with an almost mischievous smile. *"Horse patrols in March are all about eating ducks."* *"How do we catch them?"*

"You'll see," he smiled at me. *"It is your job to find them on the horse. It is us Bushmen's job to catch them."*

We got back to camp just before sunset, just in time for Mbuyotsi to call in the horses. He took his old empty baked bean tin from one of Brandy's pack boxes and he rattled some crushed mealies in it. The hobbled horses came running in.

The trackers secured each animal to the stout branches of an old leadwood tree that was lying on its side, but still rooted and alive, in the

campsite. To do this they used strong *riems* (buffalo hide ropes) that they had made themselves at Main Camp. They arranged their own bedding in two sites on the far side of the horses. Firewood was heaped in three places around the horses, next to the places where the two groups of Bushmen had chosen to sleep, and one near my bed.

One of the fires was already burning. That was the campfire on which all our meals would be cooked. The other two fires would not be lit until we all went to bed.

Ben was again my camp cook for the patrol. He peeled and boiled two large potatoes, opened a tin of bully beef which he sliced cold, and he added hot baked beans to the mix to round it off. It was a simple but wholesome evening meal that satisfied me adequately.

When the steaming meal was presented to me on a tin camp plate I looked at the potatoes lovingly. I knew that I didn't have room in my two mule packs to carry enough potatoes for a whole month. And potatoes were not the only food items that I knew would not last out the patrol. I was going to have to ration myself with all my most precious food items all along the way.

I had rice in some quantity, packed securely in oblong plastic bottles. And I had several tins of dehydrated vegetables. I also had lots of dehydrated soups in sealed packets – mushroom, tomato, vegetable, beef and others. My milk was powdered Klim milk. It wasn't very tasty but it was milk.

In preparation for this patrol I had searched high and low for powdered eggs but apparently no such thing existed in Rhodesia. I was surprised because I remembered eating powdered eggs in England during World War II.

> *Thirty years after this period of my life, when I lived in South Africa, I learnt about what South Africans call 'roosterbrood' (roasted bread). This is a bread roll prepared from wheat flour that is roasted over the hot coals of a campfire. Roosterbrood would have been ideal camp fare for a horse patrol but I had never heard of it at the time I conducted these patrols. My parents, being Scottish immigrants, knew nothing about roosterbrood either, so I had grown up knowing nothing about it. I could have carried hundreds of roasted bread rolls in just a couple of packets of flour.*

My rations were confined to what I could carry in Whisky's two pack boxes – and to what the Bushmen could teach me to eat from the veld. This

month-long patrol was going to teach me many new things.

That night I sat around the campfire after supper and conversed with the Bushmen. I had enjoyed these times on my previous horse patrol very much and the Bushmen had taught me a lot. I enjoyed that night's talk just as much but much of our discussion was not quite so casual. Much of it revolved around how we were going to get a Land Rover track into Jambili pan. Mbuyotsi knew Hwange like the back of his hand and he had the solution already worked out. I took out my notebook and wrote down, verbatim, what he told me. We had, in fact, that day travelled the route that the Bushman said was the best option.

I lay in bed that night for a long time pondering what the new boreholes would do for the game animals of Hwange. At that time I did not know just how many new boreholes there were going to be. Bruce had mentioned that *maybe* we would be getting another ten.

There were lions and hyenas all around us that night. They roared and they howled for a long time during the early evening. They drank at the pan near the camp but they kept their distance. The horses were stoic, ignoring the noisy vocal performances with disdain.

The trackers kept the three fires going all night long. Mbuyotsi slept on my tarpaulin, as he had done on the previous horse patrol, so he did the stoking of our fire during the night.

Some elephants came to the water just after dark and they trumpeted their disapproval of our presence. Then they walked off silently into the night.

That left only the yapping of jackals and the hooting of owls to send us off to sleep.

The next morning we broke camp at dawn and were well into the teak forest by the time the sun came up. We struck a diagonal route across the fossil dune heading east. At about ten o'clock we emerged onto the Kennedy vlei just above the Kennedy Number Two borehole. There were zebra and wildebeest out on the grassland. They stopped their grazing to watch our caravan cross the open ground.

Mbuyotsi crossed straight over the grassland and we plunged into the msusu scrub that lay on the other side. Here there was a scattering of emergent *wild syringa* trees *(Burkea africana)* and the odd *mukwa*, too. Every one of the *mukwas* had had bark pulled off its trunk and there were tusk gouge marks cutting across the exposed inner wood. None – not one tree – was intact and we saw several trees that had been pushed over. It brought

home to me the reason why we were shooting so many elephants in the Tjolotjo TTL.

About a mile later Mbuyotsi picked up another well-established elephant path that took us straight onto Ngweshla Pan. This was our target for the day. It was also the end of the tourist route in this part of the park.

The tourist road to Ngweshla left Main Camp travelling southeastward. It passed Makwa Pan eight miles out. In the evenings there were often as many elephants drinking at Makwa as there were elephants drinking at Nyamandhlovu. So Makwa was a favourite waterhole with the tourists, too.

After Makwa the road traversed a very loose sandy dune that was clothed in heavy teak. It emerged onto the upper end of the wide and well-grassed Kennedy vlei just above the Kennedy Number One borehole.

The Kennedy vlei at this point was some three hundred yards wide. Between its two water holes, the road ran southwards down a long drainage line between teak forests growing on the high dune ridges that rose up on either side. The distance between Kennedy One and Two was about ten miles.

The open ground of the vlei was covered in both tall and short grasses. It was a favourite habitat for wildebeest and zebra. There were often sable and roan antelope to be seen in this drainage, too, and both elephants and buffalo drank at the waterholes. The drainage line closed at Kennedy Two whereafter it became just a narrow depression running through the teak forest dunes.

At Kennedy Two the tourist road turned eastward. It ran through some very uninteresting mixed veld until it reached Ngweshla – about eight miles further on. At that point tourist vehicles had to turn around and go back to Main Camp.

When we arrived at Ngweshla the windmill was going its guns, pumping out water in great pulses into the shallow circular cement trough which had been set into the ground. From there it spilled over and ran down a furrow into the main pan which was full of water.

Again, the only trees with leaves on near the water, were *mcitamuzis (Rain Trees)* which were growing all in one clump. This is where we outspanned the horses. We had taken our time during the day so the donkeys had not lagged behind. It did not take long, therefore, before the horse and the mules had been knee-hobbled and sent out to graze. Shortly after that the donkeys joined them.

All the horses first rolled in the sand, and shook themselves vigorously,

before wandering off onto the open veld to graze. The grass was short and wiry – the ubiquitous ‘couch grass’. It seemed to be growing everywhere but was nowhere abundant.

Kitso was the horse guard for the afternoon.

At three o’clock Ben and Mbuyotsi came to fetch me from where I was resting on my camp stretcher. The three of us set off from camp in a northerly direction – to where I could see the upper branches of a big baobab tree sticking up above the canopies of the teak trees that grew all around it. This was the first baobab I had ever seen growing on Kalahari sand. What I discovered astounded me.

The tree was truly enormous. I made no attempt to measure its girth but, believe me, it was huge. What immediately worried and amazed me was that elephants had been eating the bole of the tree all around. They had made gigantic inroads into the centre of the trunk and the giant tree was clearly *in extremis*. I could not visualise that any tree could recover from this kind of damage. I had never before thought that baobab trees could be killed by elephants.

Large branches had already started falling off and the elephants had stood around eating them. The core of the baobab is soft and pithy, and succulent on the palate. I chewed some of it just to see what it was that the elephants were finding so attractive. The elephants had chewed great volumes of the pith – and spat it out. Giant wads of the stuff lay on the ground all about where it mixed with the elephants’ big droppings.

I returned to the site a year later. All that remained of the majestic tree was a pile of rotting fibre. The year after that it was difficult to determine exactly where the giant tree had been standing

I had to wait another ten years before I was to again experience the destruction of baobab trees by elephants. That happened when I was the game warden-in-charge of the Gonarezhou National Park.

The next day we moved eastward to Makololo. This was a pan that was located on a well-grassed plain just eight miles west of Ngamo. A fivemile wide stretch of teak forest was all that separated the two plains.

When we arrived at Makalolo the windmill was working overtime. Zebra and wildebeest grazed everywhere. A number of warthog, walking on their knees, chewed on the couch grass that was growing on the flat anthills. There were flat anthill mounds dotted all over the grassland.

All around grew giant mlala palms the fronds of which, sixty feet above the ground, seemed to be forever active in the gentle wind. Swarms of palm swifts skidded about the skies, twittering constantly, as they dived in and out of the skirting of dead fronds that hung beneath the green crowns. The swift's tiny cup nests of feathers and aerial flotsam, stuck together with their spit, were hidden away and affixed to the hanging brown leaves. Even the swifts' eggs are permanently secured onto their nests with spittle.

Makalolo was an idyllic campsite. The pan was again full of ducks and there was a myriad of small waders running around its edge. Francolins and guineafowl were forever putting in appearances along the interface between the plain and the surrounding msusu scrub. Teak trees loomed in the background all around.

The campsite here was shrouded in thick *mtechani* trees that provided all the shade we could ever need. There was also a convenient dead leadwood tree lying on its side. It immediately appealed to all of us as an ideal place to tether the horses in the night. As we had done at Jambili, we planned our camp around it. This tree, however, was not alive and rooted to the ground. It was dead and a fire had long ago burned away its base at the roots.

During our walk around Makololo that afternoon, Mbuyotsi, Ben and I visited a stand of giant mukwa trees that were growing on either side of the track that led to Ngamo. Some had girths that I could not get my arms around. Every single one of them showed the heavy scars of elephant feeding. Major portions of their bark had been gouged off and eaten. Some trees had been completely ring barked which meant they were doomed. Others were lying on their sides, pushed over by the elephants for no apparent reason.

The Bushmen call the mukwa mfagazi, *'the tree that bleeds'*. It was easy to see why. Where the elephants had recently fed on them dribbles of dark red sap ran down from the damaged bark. It looked just like blood.

Everywhere I looked there were signs of serious elephant damage to the park's *mukwas*. But there was more to come.

Back near camp we walked passed a thicket of young mlala palms that covered an area of perhaps thirty square yards. Their stiff green leaves, some as big as a dining table, were sticking up high above our heads. There had been a lot of elephant activity in and around this thicket so I went inside to see what the elephants had been doing.

I discovered that, hidden amongst all the greenery, were the remains of dozens and dozens of palm trunks that had been pushed over by the elephants. The thicket, therefore, had once been a dense stand of very tall palms.

And in amongst all the giant leaves, I found perhaps fifty growing cones – the nucleus of a new generation of young palms. They had all been broken off and eaten. It seemed that a herd of elephants had spent some hours in the thicket moving from one growing cone to the next. Every cone had been attacked. I did not find one single cone above two feet high that had not been destroyed.

I now began to understand the concerns that Mister D. and Bruce Austen had expressed at the management meeting last October. Much of what had been said at that meeting had been way above my head, but now I was seeing all the things they had spoken about. Even from my then still limited knowledge of the park, I was already able to corroborate their statements that elephant damage to the mukwa trees, and to the mlala palms, was widespread and unsustainable. Their insistence that the park's elephant population should be reduced in number was beginning to make sense.

The only other thing of significance that occurred at Makalolo on that patrol was that, just before dawn, a hyena sneaked into camp and attacked the horses. The horses had not seen it coming and we were all sound asleep when the attack took place. We all jumped out of our beds when the horses suddenly started to scream. There was a great urgency to their screaming that was not normal. We all picked this up.

I found myself standing next to my bed in a very naked state with the old Winchester in my hands. I had no recollection how I got there. My first conscious action was to flick the safety catch off. I had slept all night long with the fully loaded rifle in bed with me so there was no need to jack a new round into the breech. It was already in there, waiting and ready to use. The torch, however, was still amongst the bedclothes at my feet.

There was enough light from a high moon for me to properly see the horses in its monochrome light. I saw the hyena go for one of the donkeys. The donkey lifted its hindquarters high and kicked the hyena with both its back feet. There was a chunky sound as both hooves connected with the animal's chest.

There was no way I could shoot the hyena because the horses were directly behind it. So I fired a shot into the air – reloading immediately. I

wasn’t even sure if the circumstances were such that a shooting would be condoned. But my blood was up and I was prepared to do whatever had to be done to save the horses.

When the shot was fired the horses all took off in the same direction, running as fast they could away from the attacking hyena. The urgency of their flight, and the fact that they were all running in the same direction, lifted the front end of the dead tree to which the horses were all fastened, into the air. And they dragged it behind and alongside them as they raced out onto the open plain.

The hyena ran off to the side and disappeared into the night.

When the horses stopped running, the tree anchored them. We encouraged them to pull it back into camp but they couldn’t even budge it. It was their fear of the hyena that had given them the strength to do what they had done.

The next day we were in virgin territory once again. We travelled due south from Makololo and entered a well-established teak forest with very big trees. In places the sinanga was so thick I climbed off the horse and, on foot, led old Turk through the tangles. Ben and Kitso had to pull their heavily laden pack mules through the thicket undergrowth. What happened with the donkeys I do not know. That was a problem for Rojas to unravel. I had my own problems to sort out.

Mbuyotsi plodded on. He stopped on the far side of every bit of the heaviest undergrowth, and he waited for me and the mules to get through. Then he walked on again not even looking back to see how we fared.

It took us the better part of two hours to wind our way through, on foot, this very difficult part of the forest. Then the undergrowth opened up and I was able to climb back into the saddle.

It took us three hours to cover the five miles between Makololo and the next pan on our route. Once we were through the worst of the sinanga, Mbuyotsi picked up a well-beaten elephant path that brought us out directly onto a pan which he told us was called ‘*Hwecau*’. This was a Bushman name that meant ‘white buffalo’. When Mister D. had discovered the pan – twenty years before – there was a white buffalo standing knee-deep in its water. It was not an albino buffalo but one that had just finished wallowing in the white wood ash of a totally burnt-out mopani tree. The pan was on the interface between teak forest and what appeared to be an extensive mopani woodland.

Hwecau was on our list of pans to be visited. It had good shade and there appeared to be firewood aplenty all about. When I asked Mbuyotsi if we were going to camp here he shook his head.

"No grazing for the horses" he said in brief.

I had forgotten about the horses. I looked around. The tracker was right. There was no grazing in either the teak forest or the mopani veld in front of us. I kicked myself. I should have seen that myself.

We rested at Hwecau for an hour, waiting for the donkeys to catch up. Mbuyotsi back-tracked our spoor. He found Rojas with the donkeys and he helped him to get them through the last of the very heavy sickle bush. It was just as well they had large and heavy horse-hide saddle bags.

When he returned, the donkeys were still some distance behind but they were through the worst.

"Bwiya!" Come! Mbuyotsi said, commanding nobody in particular. He stomped on past us. When he was out in the open mopani he turned appreciably to the right. It still amazed me that this man always seemed to know exactly where he was going.

I climbed back into the saddle and Turk tripled briefly to catch up with the tracker. Only when the horse was in its familiar position, walking directly behind Mbuyotsi, did it settle down and match the tracker's gait. He was then back in his comfort zone.

Mbuyotsi picked up another elephant path that led us due south. He then turned westward into a drainage line between two fossil dunes. There was teak growing on the high ridges on either side. He was now happy. I could see he was on track – the track he had imprinted in his mind.

An hour later we arrived at another pan. It was a nice deep pan on the edge of a large anthill. There were two old ebony trees growing against the sloping side of the hillock, together with sundry other trees and bushes. The trees provided us with a campsite that had lots of shade and, because we were in a drainage line, there was a lot of good grass for the horses to eat. There was also a big mopani tree right inside the campsite which, long ago, had been pushed over by elephants. It was still rooted in the ground, however, so it was alive and sprouting vertical sapling branches all along the length of its trunk. It was ideal for securing the horses at night.

"Tum-Tum," Mbuyotsi said out loudly. *"The name of this pan is Tum-Tum."* He pronounced the name *'toom-toom'*. It was seven miles from Hwecau

We unsaddled the horse and the both mules, knee-hobbled them, and sent them out to graze. As usual they first rolled in the dust before running off into the grass. Ben elected to keep an eye on them – at least until the donkeys arrived.

Rojas caught up with us half-an-hour later.

That night, around the campfire, Mbuyotsi and I discussed the route we had taken through the teak forest that day. He believed it was probably the most direct route from Makololo to Hwecau. Certainly, he said, it was unlikely that we would find a better one. So we decided to stay at Tum-Tum for two nights and to permanently mark the route we had taken. The tracks of the horses were there to guide us so we had a good opportunity to define where the new Land Rover track should run. It would have been silly not to mark the route now when we had such a well-marked trail to follow.

The next day Mbuyotsi, Kitso and I retraced our journey through the teak forest from Hwecau to the Makololo plain. Mbuyotsi carried the rifle. Kitso slashed the bark of every teak tree that we passed, front and back, using a little knobkierrie axe. Those marks would be visible for a year or more to anybody and everybody who was looking for them. Our journey religiously followed the horse tracks of the day before.

I spent the walking time conversing with Mbuyotsi. We discussed many things but especially the new boreholes that were about to be drilled and equipped. He believed it would be a good development for the game reserve.

It was almost dark when we got back to Tum-Tum.

The next morning we left Tum-Tum and headed south. Our journey took us through more teak forest. This time it was wide open and we could see far away into the trees ahead. Mbuyotsi informed us we were looking for a small depression that ran from east to west. When we got to it, he said, we would follow it towards the west. Somewhere along that drainage, he told us, there was a big pan. There were, however, several small drainage lines heading west. He hoped that we would find and select the right one. This was the first time I saw him a little unsure about where he wanted to go.

We progressed. Mbuyotsi walked in front with the rifle over his shoulder.

We came to the first depression. It could hardly be called a drainage line. It looked like a shallow, sunken, sandy trough amongst the msusu scrub and scattered teak. Mbuyotsi paused, looked at it, and continued walking. A little further on, we came to another one. This one looked more substantial but again Mbuyotsi rejected it and walked on.

The third depression we came to was more substantial. *"This is it,"* Mbuyotsi announced. *"This is the depression I have been looking for."*

There and then, Mbuyotsi took a knobkierrie axe from one of the mule packs and he made a substantial slash-mark on the trunk of a lone teak tree – about head height above the ground. It was a significant mark that we would not miss when we came back this way again.

We moved in a westerly direction along the drainage line. Within half-a-hour Mbuyotsi's choice was vindicated when the scrubby depression opened out into grassland. The soil became hard and clay-like underfoot. There were mopani trees growing all along the open ground. On either side, the sand dunes grew in size and the teak trees on the ridges appeared to be a closed canopy.

The pans we encountered were at first just small puddles. Slowly they grew in number and in size as we progressed down the drainage. The bigger they got the more frequently did we encounter wild ducks floating on their surfaces. Soon we were encountering strings of pans – some quite big, some small. Sitting up on the horse I was never out of sight of their sparkling waters.

On one pan a flotilla of half-grown ducks scurried into the grass at the pan's edge as we rode past. Mbuyotsi noticed them. He turned, holding Turk by his bridle, and he looked at me enquiringly. *"Are we ready to catch some ducks?"* he asked me with a naughty smile.

"Yes. Why not?" I replied. I still didn't know exactly how we were going to accomplish that, but I was soon to find out.

"This is how we'll catch them," Mbuyotsi said with some relish. *"The next time you see a pan full of big but still flightless young ducks you must gallop up to the pan on horseback. The ducks will race out of the water and run through the grass to find places where they can hide.*

"If you sit still on the horse, and watch, you will see where they stop running and settle down in the grass. Just sit there and keep those places in sight. Kitso and I will come up on foot and you can tell us where the ducks are hiding. We will sneak up on them and catch them. All you have to do is remember where they all are."

"You've done this before?" I asked Mbuyotsi.

"Lots of times… every time we go on a horse patrol in March."

"Malindela knows about all this?" I inquired – not wanting to do anything about which Bruce Austen would not approve.

"Malindela has done this lots of times," Mbuyotsi said with a conspiratorial smile. *"Everybody has… even Shakwanki"*. So even Ted Davison had been guilty of the crime! I was in good company.

Mbuyotsi continued. *"There are thousands and thousands of baby ducks in Hwange at this time of the year,"* Mbuyotsi asserted. *"Nobody is going to miss the few that we will eat."*

So it was, therefore, that when we arrived at what turned out to be the main pan we were looking for, and when I saw its surface crammed with ducks both big a small, I urged Turk forward. I galloped along the edge of the pan and forced the young and flightless birds out of the water along the pan's bottom edge.

Coming to the end of the pan I reined old Turk to a halt and sat quietly watching myriad strings of moving grass racing through the grass sward. Each trail of movement represented one duck. One by one the movements stopped. I sat there trying to remember just where all the young ducks lay hiding.

I looked back and saw Mbuyotsi and Kitso walking towards me. Behind them Ben was holding onto the reins of both the mules in one hand. In the other hand he was holding the Winchester rifle. Behind the mules, the donkeys were walking about well spread out. They still had their packs on their backs but the minute the caravan stopped, they started grazing heavily on the tall green grass.

"Where are they?" Mbuyotsi asked me upon his arrival.

I pointed to a small bush behind which I knew one duck lay. *"There is one duck behind that bush,"* I told him. *"There is another one about ten yards behind it in the middle of that open space…."* And so the communications flowed. One by one Mbuyotsi and Kitso found and picked up the ducks the whereabouts of which I had pointed out to them. And they found others, too. They rung their necks and dropped them back onto the ground – white-belly up. Then they went in search of the next one. They had killed sixteen ducks between them before I called a halt.

"Woah… Woah… Woah…" I shouted to them. *"That's enough you guys. How many ducks do you want to eat tonight?"* Had I not stopped them the trackers would have killed every duck they could get their hands on.

The two Bushmen retraced their steps and picked up all the ducks they had killed. They immediately carried them by their necks to a big anthill on the west side of the pan. There was shade there, cast by three big ebony trees

growing on the anthill. There were several young mopani trees, too, onto which we could tie the horses for the night.

Mbuyotsi had already selected our camp for the night! This told me he had been here before. I wondered where, in Hwange, this remarkable Bushman had not been?

Kitso went back to the mules, relieving Ben of the job of holding Brandy. The whole caravan then drifted across the vlei into camp.

The horses were out-spanned. The horse and mules were kneehobbled and sent out to graze. The donkeys were released to graze alongside them on the vlei.

The whole afternoon was taken up with soaking the young ducks in pots of boiling water, removing their feathers and then cooking their meat. All the trackers, and I, became involved in the exercise. Most of the ducks were red-billed teal. Three were knob-billed ducks – threetimes the size of a teal. I selected the biggest of the knobbies for myself and I plucked it very carefully. The trackers had their own ideas about how ducks should be cooked, and each of them tried to convince everybody else that their idea was the best. We made a jovial group all working at the same task.

I knew exactly how I wanted *my* duck cooked. I decided that, on this special occasion, I was going to cook my own supper.

Having selected *my* duck I told the trackers they could take the rest and cook them whichever way *they* wanted.

I cut the carcass of my knobbie duck into same-size portions and committed them to a pot of boiling water, adding a generous portion of salt. What I remember most about that duck was that it had thick slabs of soft translucent fat just under its skin. The fat ran down both sides and along the full length of its body.

I boiled the duck pieces until the flesh was soft. Then I added a packet of dehydrated mushroom soup and mixed all the juices together. Adding the soup mix required that I add a bit more water. When I judged the consistency to be right I left the pot on a bed of hot coals next to the fire, with its lid on, to simmer.

That night the trackers added extra mealiemeal to their stiff porridge (sadza) – enough to provide me with a generous portion, too. When they sat down to eat their ducks and porridge that night I ate my meal with them. Like them, I used my fingers, making a torpedo-like cake out of a handful of hot

sadza, by kneading it in my hand. I dipped the torpedo into the thick soup in my duck pot and bit off a mouthful with my teeth. With the other hand, I extracted a portion of juicy duck flesh from my pot and I ate that separately. When I had finished picking a bone, like the Bushmen did, I threw it onto the fire where it sizzled until it had burnt dry and turned to ash.

My meal was absolutely delicious. It was beyond my wildest expectations. As I write this now I can feel the juices flowing in my mouth. My meal that night – now fifty years ago – is one that I still remember.

Those damn ducks costs us a whole day of patrolling. There was so much cooked duck meat left after our meal that it was agreed we could not and should not waste it. So, by mutual consent, we decided to call the next day *'Sunday'*. It was to be a day of rest and relaxation. It gave us the opportunity not to break camp and so to also enjoy the remnants of our poached duck meal the next night, too.

The trackers, however, stipulated one proviso. They had all had a taste of my duck cooked in dehydrated mushroom soup and they insisted that I supply them with a packet. This I did gladly. I got up from the fire, there and then, and I recovered two packets from my katoonda.

Rojas collected all the remaining pieces of duck from the trackers' three pots and he committed them to a single big pot. He poured both packets of soup into the mix and, at my suggestion he added some extra water and salt. Then he set their tomorrow's evening meal next to the fire. It started to simmer within a few minutes.

I wore the crown that night. Everybody agreed that my way of cooking a duck was the best.

That was the one and only time that year that we ate wild duck on a horse patrol. The next time we enjoyed such a meal was in March 1962, and again in March 1963. It became something of an annual ritual. Throughout the rest of the year, therefore, I thought about my horse patrol in the coming March with a great deal of happy expectation.

Our camp cuisine was not always so great. Towards the end of that patrol all our food reserves were running low so we were augmenting our diets with whatever we could extract from the bush.

One day Mbuyotsi disturbed a very big leguaan (monitor lizard) as he was guiding the patrol through the veld. He hastily placed the rifle on the ground and immediately gave chase. The giant lizard scuttled away and

climbed a nearby mopani tree. It had managed to get its head and shoulders into a hole before the Bushman caught it by the tail. Kitso quickly gave the reins of his mule to Ben and he ran over to where Mbuyotsi was fighting with the reptile. A battle royal then ensued.

It seemed nothing was going to induce that leguaan to let go. Its body was puffed up and, even across the thirty-yard distance that separated me from the goings on, I could hear it hissing loudly in protest. At one stage both the trackers were hanging onto the lizard's tail and its back legs, with their feet off the ground, but the obstinate animal hung on.

Then, suddenly, the big monitor released its claws from where they were attached inside the hole, and it fell out of the tree. Both men collapsed on to the ground with it and their quarry broke free from their grasp. This time it did not run away. This time it turned on the two men and attacked them.

The leguaan puffed itself up and strutted about on its stiff high legs, its mouth open and hissing. A long black-and-red forked tongue continually flicked out of its mouth – *tasting* the air. Its long slim tail was coiling and moving about slowly and menacingly behind it. Every now and again the animal turned sideways and, using its tail, it whipped one or the other tracker across the legs.

Jocularity now became part of the game. Both trackers were laughing and shouting instructions to each other in their peculiar click language. Finally Kitso dived onto the reptile's back and pinned it to the ground.

Mbuyotsi jumped in to help. He caught his quarry around the neck and lifted it off the ground. Comparing it against the tracker's height I guessed it to be nearly five feet long. He brought the lizard over to me and held it up for my inspection. There was a triumphant look in the tracker's eyes. His smile was infectious.

Turk was not impressed with this performance right in front of his nose. He pranced sideways away from the tracker.

"And now you have caught it," I asked Mbuyotsi, *"what are you going to do with it?"*

"*Supper!"* he replied laconically. *"Supper?"*

"*Wait,"* the tracker said with a smile. *"You'll see."*

Whilst this conversation had been going on Kitso was fossicking about in one of Brandy's pack boxes. He came forward with a small knobkierrie axe in his hand. Mbuyotsi placed the leguaan on the ground, holdings its head firm. Kitso sunk the blade of the axe deep into its skull.

Kitso then took charge of their kill tying it securely onto the top of his mule pack tentage. Mbuyotsi picked up his rifle, blew the sand off the bolt action, and resumed his leadership role. Turk obediently set off behind the tracker and we were off on our merry way as if there had been no leguaan hunt and no collection of our meal for the night.

In preparing our evening meal that afternoon, the trackers first scalded the dead leguaan with hot water. This blistered the epidermis which peeled off easily. Beneath this outer skin the reptile's main underskin was shiny bright and new-looking. This inner skin – the derm or true skin – I was told, was edible. They gutted the beast and the camp skivvy took its innards into the bush and threw them away. The whole carcass was then cut up into small pieces and committed to a big pot. Some salt was added and perhaps a gallon of water. The pot then went on the fire.

When the meat was cooked Kitso used the shaft of his knobkierrie axe – as a pestle – to pound the meat to a pulp inside the pot. He carefully pulled out all the bones and threw them onto the fire. This beating of the meat carried on for some time and, periodically, Kitso ran the shreds through his fingers to find and to remove the bones. The flesh was creamy white and the skin a mottled gray. The end product, therefore, was a variegated salmagundi that smelled and tasted of nothing much. I considered offering to add a packet of dehydrated soup to the mix but I refrained from interfering. The Bushmen seemed to know what they wanted so I left them to it. They called the concoction *koveh-koveh* or rather *mgwabaan koveh-koveh*. *Mgwabaan* was the Bushman name for a leguaan. Koveh-koveh was the name for the way the dish was prepared.

That night I ate mgwabaan koveh-koveh and sadza, with the Bushmen, around the evening's campfire. The meat had a very bland taste but it was certainly very edible – when you were hungry. Salt helped to improve the taste. And with liberal quantities of sadza it was filling. That was all the Bushman wanted – to have full bellies at the end of the day.

The trackers recommended mgwabaan koveh-koveh highly. Don't listen to them! I would not recommend that *anyone* place an order for such a meal in a restaurant. I must say, however, that, over the years, I ate mgwabaan koveh-koveh many times with my trackers. But after that first time I always added some kind of dehydrated soup to the mix to give it flavour.

Tortoise is something else. I ate tortoise many, many times on these horse patrols, too. And Hwange is endowed with a great many tortoises. The

common tortoise was the leopard tortoise. They grew to quite a large size – bigger than a football. There was a less common, smaller and flatter one called the hinged tortoise. This species was given its name because the lower front part of its shell was hinged. This made it possible for the tortoise to close its shell tightly when the animal's head had been retracted. The Bushmen called all tortoises, *ifuduh*.

The Bushmen made koveh-koveh of tortoises, too. The tortoise was killed simply by cutting its head off. Both sides of the belly-shell-plate were then cut through with a knobkierrie axe and the bottom plate was removed by cutting away the adhering flesh with a sharp knife. The animal was then gutted and the innards thrown away.

The legs were removed after cutting away the leg muscles where they adhered to the shell. A tortoise's spine is attached to the shell. The spine, in fact, is part of the shell. So its back muscles have to be cut away from the inside of the carapace. This sounds all very complicated but it is quite easy to do and the Bushmen were past masters at the task. The legs were scalded with boiling water. This blistered the epidermis – just as the leguaan's skin had blistered – and the thin outer skin was peeled off in the same manner. This is as far as the tortoise's similarity with the leguaan went.

Tortoises are herbivores. They eat nothing but grass and other edible green plants. Their fresh meat is red and juicy. When cooked it is delicious. I first tasted tortoise meat when I was given a leg from the Bushmen's pot. The pieces of tortoise meat, legs and all, had simply been boiled in water with a teaspoonful of salt. When I later cooked tortoise meat myself, therefore, I resisted adding a dehydrated soup mix. I believed that I could not better the flavour of stewed tortoise meat with just the right amount of salt. This is another of our horse patrol delicacies that still make my mouth water.

I did not koveh-koveh my tortoise meat as did the Bushmen. I ate the tortoise piece by piece, as one eats the different parts of a chicken.

So partial did I become to tortoise meat that one day, when Mbuyotsi returned to camp carrying a big female in his arms, I swapped him two tins of bully beef for his catch of the day.

There were also terrapins in the pans. Some people call them watertortoises but they are very different from true tortoises. The most significant difference is that terrapins are meat-eaters. They eat fish and they catch birds, up to the size of a dove, when they come to the water to drink. They also eat carrion which becomes available to them when an animal dies

in the water. Terrapin meat is white and tasteless but, like the leguaan, it is still edible. This is important to know when you are *really* hungry.

One of the most distasteful things about terrapins is that, when you haul them out of the water, they stink. Their bodies and shells as covered in slimy algae that carries the most obnoxious smell imaginable. The Bushman, however, had an answer for the smell. They killed the terrapin by cutting off its head then they dropped its body, shell and all, into a pot of boiling water. This immediately killed the smell. The dead terrapin could then be treated in the same fashion the Bushmen treated a tortoise. When I say that a terrapin is edible, however, that is about all I wish to say about it.

When we came across lions on a kill we chased them off and cut off whatever meat we needed. This was quite a regular occurrence. It is also not too difficult to do, although sometimes we had a spot of trouble if the lions were particularly hungry and their kill was very fresh.

Whenever we saw circling vultures we investigated. Sometimes the scavengers were coming down to a fresh lion kill. Sometimes they were coming down to a poacher's kill. And sometimes they were leaving a lion's kill from which they had picked the bones clean. When this latter case applied, especially if the kill was a buffalo and it was reasonably fresh, we removed the big hind leg bones and we cut off the head. These we took back to camp.

Back in camp the head was split open with an axe and the animal's brain was extracted. This was fried and eaten as relish, with sadza, at the evening meal.

The big bones of the back legs were roasted over the campfire in the evening and cracked open with the knobkierrie part of a knobkierrie axe (when the blade from the axe is removed, the shaft becomes a knobkierrie, or cudgel). The bones were broken right through and shaken over a plate. I can still hear, in my mind's ear, the slushing sounds that cooked marrow makes as it falls from the hot tube of the bone onto a plate. The cooked marrow was carefully divided into six so that everybody could get a portion. I was one of the six. This is another delicacy that still, to this day, makes my saliva run when I think of it. The Bushmen call bone marrow *mkandjho.*

We ate many other things on a long horse patrol, too numerous to mention here. Among them were porcupines and pythons. We also ate the honey from regular bees as well as honey from the little stingless bees we white people call *mopani flies*. The Bushmen call them *mghoghomchani.*

Mbuyotsi was a past master at finding huge bulbous roots underground that, above ground, only manifest their presence with a thin vine that grows up the stems of trees and shrubs. When he dug them up they were often large enough to be difficult to carry. When chopped up and cooked – like potatoes – they were edible but uninteresting. They, nevertheless, filled our bellies.

During the month of April, when the pans were drying up, we dug up the tubers of water lilies that lay in profusion beneath the soft mud surfaces. We often missed out on this food supply because warthogs, baboons and elephants had gotten into the pans before us.

Water lily tubers are cooked like potatoes, boiled in water with a bit of salt. They have a bland and uninspiring taste but they, too, helped fill our bellies. I often wondered how Hwange's water lilies ever procreated because by the end of April there were no tubers left in the mud anywhere. There was absolutely nothing left to kick-start the new growing season that began with the coming of the rains in November.

Any horse patrol that was over two weeks in length, always created food problems for the rangers and their trackers. The only way they could survive was by way of living off the veld. This meant eating the many sources of food that the Bushmen were able to obtain from nature. Those young rangers who were unable to do this quickly fell by the way side. They often returned from a difficult horse patrol and straight away resigned their posts. Game rangers that survived the course were never *'sissies'*.

There were times when I had to shoot something for the pot – or we would have starved. Those occasions, however, were few and far between. On one such occasion I shot a grey duiker; on another a warthog. I once shot a buffalo to ration two European foresters and their native labourers who were doing a survey of the teak forests in a remote part of the game reserve. My trackers took a goodly share of that meat which they benghisa-ed over a smoky fire for three days. The only other *'thing'* I ever shot for myself on a horse patrol was an Egyptian goose, which I killed with a .458 bullet through the head.

We returned to Main Camp having reconnoitered six new pans. They were in the right locations and they had all the other prerequisites for a game water supply. We had also determined routes for Land Rover tracks that would link all six of these pans to the rudimentary access-tracksystem that ran out from Main Camp to Ngamo in the east; and to Zibanini, on the Botswana border, in the south.

Enjoyable though this patrol had been – and it had taught me a great many things about survival in the desert – a whole month in the saddle was a very long time. I was happy to get back home to single quarters at Main Camp.

* * *

The day after I arrived back I shot another two buffalo bulls near Dett for Main Camp rations. Everybody was happy to see me back if, for no other reason, it relieved them of what had become the tedious job of shooting the weekly rations.

It was a job that I, myself, never found wearisome.

During my absence Tim had been busy. He had shot two stockkilling lions in the Tjolotjo district near Salankomo, and he had shot another six bull elephants in the teak forests north of Salakomo.

Tim had also escorted some road engineers who were looking for a suitable site for their workshops and accommodations west of Main Camp. They selected a site near Shapi, a boreholed game water supply between Main Camp and Shumba. They had come to peg the route of the new tarmac road that was to run from Main Camp to Shumba, and then to build it.

Hwange, the sleeping giant, was stirring!

Other things had been happening, too. The first of two building supervisors had taken up residence in the rest camp. The planned refurbishment of the old Main Camp tourist accommodations was about to happen. Already two small staff houses were being added to the line of staff houses behind the old tourist office. They were located alongside Ian Miller's house and the house that Fred Starkey lived in during the six-months-long open tourist season. The new houses were scheduled to accommodate the building supervisors who were about to revamp Main Camp.

Strangely, all this development disturbed me. I liked the old Main Camp I had been appointed to. I didn't want *anything* to change. But change was happening. Change was a-coming. Change was inevitable.

* * *

Two days after I came back from horse patrol I was dispatched to Ngamo. Lions had been killing tribal cattle not too far from old Headman Mazai's village. Tim was away at the time working on some task that Bruce had set him. Harry was busy refurbishing pumps and Lister diesel engines. Once again, I was the only ranger available to respond.

Bruce called me in to his office and told me what the problem was. Then, very matter-of-factly, he told me to go and sort it out. This was only the second time I had been tasked to hunt a stock-killing lion. Malindela seemed to have no qualms about sending me out on the task this time. He knew, of course, that I had extensive experience with leopards – both trapping and hunting – so I suppose he thought I would have no trouble with the leopard's bigger cousin.

Immediately upon my arrival Mazai led me to a cow that the lions had killed during the night. It was located deep inside the teak forest south of his village. I spent the whole afternoon setting Main Camp's five big gin traps all about the kill. We camped that night in the same place where Tim and I had camped when we had come down to Ngamo on our very first elephant control patrol together – just a few short months before. How my circumstances had changed in that short space of time!

It was a lovely campsite under an enormous camel thorn tree and it overlooked the wide Ngamo plains on the tribal trust land side of the game reserve boundary line. There were wildebeest and zebra out on the grass and I went to sleep that night to the lullaby of wildebeest *gnuuuuus* and the occasional piping call of a zebra. I visited the kill site very early the next morning and found two lions in the traps. These I shot without much ado. They were both young male nomads about three years old. During these early hunts it never ceased to amaze me just how big a lion really is – even young nomads.

I de-activated the three other traps by pushing sticks onto the footplates. The kill was located in a place where there was a chance that a herd boy, attending his father's grazing cattle, might walk past during the day. I didn't want to have to come back to extricate some inquisitive picannin's mangled foot from one of the devices. We covered the kill with lots of green-leafed branches to make sure vultures and eagles would not find it.

Ben and Mbuyotsi were with me on this patrol so, with Mazai's help, the four of us lifted the bodies of the two lions onto the Land Rover. We drove back to Mazai's village where I left Mbuyotsi to skin them.

There had been three lions in the group so I guessed the third one would be wandering about somewhere in the forest nearby. I had the time to hunt it down and didn't want to waste the opportunity. So I drove to the kill site, parking the Land Rover in the teak about a hundred yards back. Ben and I then walked the remaining distance moving quietly through the trees.

I had a hunch the surviving young lion would be out of sorts without its companions to support it. I was sure it hadn't gone very far. Rather, I *hoped* it hadn't gone very far.

We found fresh tracks not far from the kill. They were tracks made that very morning after the sun had come up.

The lion's tracks, easy to follow on the soft Kalahari sand, led us in a roundabout way through the teak forest then back towards the kill. Ben followed the spoor religiously, moving very quietly and unobtrusively through the heavy undergrowth. I followed right on his heels.

The lion had lain down in many places. In one place it had rolled about and wallowed in the sand. It had then lain down on top of the soil it had disturbed. It got up from there and wandered about in what appeared to be a disorientated manner before lying down yet again. No sooner had it lain down than it got up and walked off yet again.

There were many criss-crossing tracks. The distraught young lion had moved in many circles, meandering back over his own spoor lots of times. This helped us reduce the distance we had to track him. We cut the corners whenever we could.

"He's very agitated," Ben said to me quietly. *"He's looking for his two friends."*

I nodded my agreement and placed a silencing finger vertically over my lips. It would be better if we didn't talk.

Then, not far ahead of us, I heard a low moaning call. Our lion was calling his dead mates in the softest of soft mewing tones. It gave his position away.

Ben turned silently, looked me in the eye, and pointed towards the sound. I nodded, confirming that I had heard the call, too. I guessed the lion was only a hundred yards away directly in front of us.

I pulled out my ash bag and tested the wind. We were O.K. A very soft breeze was blowing across our path from left to right.

Ben waited and watched the dust floating off on the air. He looked at me. I flicked my hand, middle finger extended, to the fore. It was the hunter's silent signal to his tracker telling him to *'landa'* – to follow the tracks. Ben turned and pushed his nose towards the ground.

We progressed slowly. Both Ben and I were now meticulous in picking our way silently through the forest undergrowth. We made not a sound. I saw the odd pug mark in the sand which told me Ben was on track.

The lion moaned again. We both stopped and listened. It was much closer now. Ben looked at me. I flicked my finger forward. Again Ben dropped his nose to the ground.

The lion was moving about in a seemingly agitated manner. Intermittently he moaned softly. I judged the distance. He was now no more than fifty yards ahead of us. I poked the muzzle of the rifle barrel into Ben's buttocks. The tracker stopped and looked back at me. I indicated that I wanted to take the lead. I determined that, if the lion continued moaning, I could bridge the gap between us quicker if I simply moved towards the sound.

Ben shifted to one side and let me pass. He extracted a pack of twenty cartridges from a breast pocket of his shirt and slipped the cardboard sleeve open. As I walked past him my eye caught the glint of brass. I always looked for the brass. It reassured me that Ben was ready to support me.

I now walked more briskly but still silently towards where the lion was still moaning softly. It was located to my immediate front. As I drew closer the sounds moved to my right front. There was a pause. I stopped to listen. When the moaning resumed the sounds were coming from my left front.

The lion was clearly very disturbed. He was missing his vagrant companions and was advertising his presence. As Ben had said, he was trying to call up his two lost brothers not realising they were dead.

I tested the wind. It was still blowing from left to right. If the lion stayed on my left hand side it would never smell us. I hurried forward flicking the safety catch of my rifle into the fully 'off' position. I was now ready for anything. The gap had narrowed to perhaps thirty yards. Strangely I felt no fear. My nerves were under control. I was completely in command of all my emotions.

We entered a small pocket of msusu scrub. Here long grass replaced the heavy-leafed understory of the teak. The soft moans were much louder now. I was right on top of him. The lion had no idea I was so close at hand. It continued to moan. We were now close enough for me to hear it walking about, its feet shuffling amongst the dry leaves underfoot.

There was the sound of tall grass being disturbed as the lion pushed its way through the brush from one place to another. My senses were wide awake. Contact was imminent. Not far away, to my left, I saw the grass tops moving. The lion was coming towards me. I stood and I waited. The lion came on. It continued to moan softly to itself.

I had my rifle butt on my shoulder when the lion pushed its way through the last of the grass sward on my left hand side. It was no more than ten paces from me. I saw its tawny body sliding through the grass. It came on. It broke cover right in front of me. Then, suddenly, it saw me. It stopped dead in its tracks. It lifted its head high and looked directly into my eyes. At that very moment its head was knocked backward as my bullet ploughed through its brain.

Like the other two lions we had killed in the traps, this one was also a young nomadic male. It had a scruffy yellow mane around its neck. We had accounted for all three of the stockkilling lions I had come to Ngamo to shoot. I should, there and then, have broken camp and headed back to Main Camp. My task had been accomplished. By the time we had finished skinning the last of the three lions however, the day was gone. And I was dead tired.

* * *

Dusk found me sitting in my camp chair under the camel thorn tree, gazing into the hot embers of our campfire. I was mesmerized by the ephemeral flicking of the almost invisible purple flames that were running close to and all over the red hot coals. I can look into the coals of campfires, or water running over stones, for ages without ever feeling bored.

That night the wildebeest and the zebra entertained us with their nocturnal chorus. The jackals yakked, hyenas howled and owls hooted. There was no roaring of lions.

We were just about to break camp the following morning, when Mazai pitched up to see us. There was another native with him. The stranger was from a village about ten miles away to the south of Ngamo. He had heard I was at Ngamo shooting lions so he had pedalled on his bicycle through the early dark hours of the morning to ask for Mazai's help. Two elephant bulls had raided his gardens during the night and he wanted me to come and shoot them. He believed that Mazai would be able to convince me to help him. So the headman requested: *Would I please return with his friend to his village and shoot the elephants?*

I had no mandate from Bruce to shoot elephants. Indeed, I had not shot an elephant without Tim Braybrooke being in attendance, since Tony Boyce and I had killed the old bull, Juapi, in January. All Bruce had instructed me to do was to come to Ngamo and deal with the lions. I had done that. Prudence told me that what I should do now was to decline the request and return to Main Camp. I pondered the problem.

In those days we carried no radios. There were no telephones at Ngamo. There was no way, therefore, that I could get in touch with Main Camp. In situations like this the game rangers of Hwange made their own decisions and acted on them accordingly. Tim would have just gone off and done what had to be done. But I was not Tim Braybrooke. I was in a quandary. I did not know if I had reached the stage where Malindela considered me competent enough to make this kind of decision on my own.

The strange native man watched me closely. He picked up my hesitancy and he pleaded: *"Haaie… Nkosana. The elephants have eaten nearly all our mealies… Please Nkosana. Come and shoot them. They have been raiding all the people's gardens every night now for over a week. There are just two of them. Please Nkosana. Please come and shoot them."*

I recalled the big smile on Bruce's face when, the morning after Tony Boyce and I had killed the old elephant bull Juapi, he had congratulated us both on killing our first solo elephant together.

"So now you have earned your wings," he had said. *"Now you think are qualified to go hunt elephants on your own."* Then he had looked at us both more sternly. *"That day will come,"* he had said soberly. *"When it does just remember, you still have an awful lot to learn about shooting elephants. I don't want you going ape on me. Don't think you know it all. Don't ever take any chances. If you do, you will end up dead."*

Jurie Grobler had used those exact same words – "you will end up dead" – to caution me when he told me not to be foolhardy when hunting leopards. On both those occasions I had taken those words to heart. But none of that helped me to make up my mind about shooting these two elephants now. The question was: *Should I go and shoot them, or should I not?*

I thought about the fact that it was now policy to shoot as many elephants in the Tjolotjo TTL as we could. Hwange needed its elephant numbers reduced.

"Nkosana… Please man…" That is a South-Africanism, I thought obliquely – using the word *'man'* in that manner. I looked at the Ndebele tribesman more acutely. I realised then that he must have spent some time working underground in one of Johannesburg's gold mines. Not that *that* made any difference to the decision I was mulling over. My mind was procrastinating!

Mazai stood quietly. He watched me carefully. His face was expressionless. I wondered if he knew what I was thinking.

"Mazai…. Can you put someone here to guard our camp?" The headman nodded. A smile spread across his face.

"O.K., then," I said at last. *"Mbuyotsi, I want you to come with Ben and me today. You can carry the 9.3 – just in case we need it."*

The Bushman smiled, too. I was falling into the habit of using Ben as my lead tracker which, if it persisted, would mean that I would be using Mbuyotsi less and less. I guess Mbuyotsi was beginning to feel a little unwanted and unloved.

An hour later we were following the spoor of two big elephant bulls out of the complainant's mealie lands. I was feeling uncomfortable knowing that I did not have Bruce's *specific* permission to hunt elephants on my own. Neither, however, did I have any instruction from him *not* to do so. He *had* said, after Tony's and my killing of old Juapi, that I was now qualified to hunt elephants on my own.

Well… he had not said that *exactly* but he had strongly implied it.

I decided to put the matter behind me. I was going to do this hunt today whatever it was Bruce had said or implied. I had already made up my mind. What Bruce's reaction to it was going to be was something that I would deal with later. All I had to make sure of was that I did not *mess up* with my shooting. The possibility of me returning to Main Camp to tell Bruce that I had wounded one of these elephants was just unthinkable.

The elephants had left the lands sometime after midnight. As the complainant had said, they had made a real mess of his crop. I wondered how the man was going to feed his family for the rest of the year. But that was not my problem.

With Ben in the lead and Mbuyotsi behind me carrying the 9.3 mm Mauser, we wound our way through the sinanga beneath the teak trees. The complainant walked behind carrying two josaks full of water.

The tracking was easy but the breeze was fickle, blowing first this way then that. We had no choice but to ignore it and to follow the spoor. I just hoped the wind would settle before we started closing the final gap. As luck would have it that is exactly what happened.

Towards midday we heard the elephants pushing their way gently through the sinanga ahead of us. The coarse sound of heavy brush slowly scratching across tough hide was becoming a familiar sound. We all stopped to listen.

The elephants were moving but they were not disturbed. They were travelling very slowly, stopping often to feed on tidbits they found in the forest undergrowth. Every now and again, I could hear one of them chewing on a stick. There was the intermittent sound of big ears flapping gently.

I pulled out my ash bag and tested the wind. The cloud of white wood ash drifted off on the breeze. It was blowing consistently in one direction now – forward and to our right.

I made a silent gesture to Ben that he should leave the tracks and move ahead to the right hand side. He now needed to follow the wind and not the spoor. He understood. We moved off into the sinanga following a diverging course to that of the elephant's route. The gentle breeze blew onto our backs. We progressed slowly, stopping often to listen to what the elephants were doing on our far left hand side. We were playing a game of hide and seek.

Ten minutes later, we drew opposite the elephants. When we turned to face them the breeze was blowing from our left front to our right back. Our position was perfect.

The elephants were, at that stage, over a hundred yards away. Still out of sight. Their behaviour during all this while had not changed. They were still walking very slowly, stopping often, feeding in a desultory manner, surrounded by the forest's heavy undergrowth.

I listened carefully to the sounds of their movements. They were separated from each other by perhaps thirty yards. They were clearly still very much a team but they had spread out as they slowly meandered through the trees. This was not what I wanted. If I was going to kill *both* these elephants – and that was my intention – I needed them to be much closer together.

I looked at my watch. It was just after midday. I remembered Japan's advice to Tim, when Tim and I had shot out that breeding herd. He had told Tim we should wait and catch the elephants when they were asleep during the hottest time of the day. I judged these two would very soon be settling down into *their* siesta mode.

The heat was oppressive. The sweat was pouring off my body in heavy rivulets. I could feel it running down my back. My armpits were awash. I pulled a handkerchief from one of my trouser pockets and wiped my face. No sooner was my face dry than it beaded up again. There was a constant puddle clinging to the hairs above both my eyebrows. It dripped off in front of my

eyes. The palms of my hands were clammy. I had to constantly wipe them dry on the front of my trousers. I didn't know when I would have to use my rifle and wet hands would make my weapon handling slippery. I *had* to keep my hands dry.

Our position with regards the wind was now perfect. The elephants were almost immobile. We still had not seen them but we knew where they were. Ever more I began to feel sure they were about to settle down for their heat-of-the-day doze. I decided to wait out the small period of time it would take for them to get properly settled. It was not going to take much longer.

I made silent gestures to the trackers telling them all these things. They nodded in agreement. Ben, who had been carrying my rifle all morning, leant it up against the trunk of a big teak tree and he sat down with his back against its bole. I sat down beside him. Mbuyotsi and his native companion found other places to sit. We passed around the josaks and each of us had a good drink of water. Then we waited. And we dozed. Nevertheless, every one of us kept one ear open, listening for elephant sounds and movement.

The midday silence in the forest was eerie. None of us spoke a word. We just sat there each absorbed in our own thoughts. No bird sang. No cricket cricked. All we could hear, every now and again, was the gentle sound of movement in the distance as one or another of the elephants moved a few paces forwards in the undergrowth.

The first intimation that something was happening was when one of the bulls growled deep down in his throat. It was a soft and guttural sound filtered by the heavy forest shrubbery. The other elephant responded from some distance away. There followed the sound of stiff brush scraping over tough hide. I visualised what was happening. One of the elephants was moving towards the other. When the two came together they growled softly at each other. They were *talking* together, quietly, in their own language.

I heard elephant turds hitting the ground. Dull thuds in the distance! I listened carefully. One of the elephants was defecating. There was the acute sound of a prolonged, bubbly and very liquid fart. There was the sound of water gushing onto the sand. He was also urinating. Mbuyotsi giggled. I looked at him sternly. He shut up. More heavy droppings hit the ground. The other elephant was relieving himself, too.

All this was followed by the hollow resonance of an elephant's plank-like ears pushing through the heavy sinanga. It was faster and more urgent than before.

"Come," I said softly to the trackers. *"Yena hamba." They are moving out.*

I rose to my feet, picking up my rifle from where it was leaning up against the tree. I would carry the weapon myself from now on. I walked ahead of the pack directly towards where we could hear the elephants moving. The others followed.

I stopped every now and again to listen. Every time I stopped I heard the sound of elephants pushing their way slowly through the sinanga. They were now definitely walking faster and more methodically than before. They were moving into the wind, directly away from us.

Presently we came across the fresh elephant droppings we had heard impacting with the ground. The spoor told us the two animals were together. They were now moving in a straight line, the one behind the other. Both animals had defecated before moving off. There were two piles of dung.

I kicked the top of one turd open and placed the back of my fingers onto its wet inner parts. It was piping hot.

The next time I stopped there was no sound coming from the elephants – no sound at all. They had either stopped or they were moving away from us faster than we were travelling on their spoor.

They were walking fast. I did not believe they had suddenly gone to ground.

I moved to one side of the tracks, indicating to Ben that he should follow the spoor again. He walked passed me and, with his nose to the ground, started to follow the tracks.

Twenty minutes later Ben stopped dead. He turned his head to the left, listening intently with his right ear. When he turned back to look at me he had a smile on his face. He lifted his right hand to his ear. He fingered it, forcing it to flap gently. He had heard the flapping of elephant ears in the bush ahead. I listened. I too heard the soft slapping of an elephant's ears way off in the distance.

I looked at Ben and nodded my head in agreement. The elephants had at last gone to ground. They were at their siesta just a few hundred yards ahead of us.

We found them standing quietly under the spreading branches of a very large *mchibi* tree.

The shade cast by the *mchibi* is much denser than that offered by any of the teak trees that were growing in profusion all around. The *mchibi* is an

evergreen, the teak deciduous. Even when both trees are in full leaf, however, the shade cast by the *mchibi* is much denser than that produced by teak. For this reason, elephants are often prepared to walk the extra mile to enjoy the greater shade.

The undergrowth was much thinner beneath the *mchibi* than it was below the teak. The deeper shade inhibited the growth of the understory! Nevertheless, there was still enough cover to mask my close approach. The wind had not changed so getting up real close to the elephants was not a problem.

Both elephants were slumbering deeply. They were standing alongside each other, head to tail, swaying gently back and forth. The extremities of their relaxed trunks were lying flat on the ground in front of them. Their heads were hanging from limp shoulders. Their eyes were shut, the eyelids fluttering softly.

They were both very big bulls. Big in body. Heavy in tusk. The tusks were not long but they were very thick. They were breathing stertorously, almost snoring, on their feet. The rich smell of their fresh dung and the cloying scent of musth permeated the air all around.

Ben was at my side as I approached the closest animal. He had an open packet of spare cartridges in his left hand. With silent gestures I instructed Ben to stay where he was. He looked perplexed. There were already two shells in his right hand, ready to pass on to me if I needed them. Today, however, I wanted to get closer than just ten yards range and I felt that Ben might be an impediment.

I looked back. Mbuyotsi and his native companion were standing watching us from a distance. I had told *them* to keep away until the hunt was over. The Bushman had the 9.3 mm Mauser at the ready.

I moved forwards slowly – careful with my every footstep. I was within five paces of the nearest bull before I put the rifle to my shoulder. This was the closest I had ever been to an elephant that I was about to kill. At this range I could *not* miss the brain. My heart was in my mouth!

At that moment the old hunter's adage flashed into my mind:

'Git as close as ye can, laddie,' the old man had told his protégé.

'THEN GIT TEN YARDS CLOSER'.

I had done my bit. I had come *'the ten yards closer'.*

I looked at the huge elephant bull standing right in front of me. He hadn't a clue his nemesis was that close at hand! I angled my body into the right

position for firing. I had long ago moved the safety catch to *'off'* on my rifle. It had been ready to fire for some time. Outwardly I was calm. Inside my nerves were aflutter.

I drew an imaginary line between the elephant's ear hole and its eye. I focussed my attention on the spot that was one third forward of the ear hole. I took aim. I squeezed the trigger gently. The rifle's report shattered the somnolent quietude of the forest. Instantly the stricken elephant's head jerked upwards. Its front legs remained stiff. Its back legs collapsed. Its large brown eyes opened and stared into eternity. And it fell towards me.

I felt, rather than saw, the impact of the huge animal's collision with the ground. I heard the resonance of its ears as they bounced against its shoulder. I was conscious of the light cloud of pale brown dust that puffed up into the air from all over the elephant's body. Out of the corner of my eye I saw its upper back leg jerking in the air. And I heard the liquid articulation of its hip joint.

All these things told me immediately that the elephant was dead. But my mind was not with the dead elephant. It had already re-focussed on the living one.

The other elephant, shocked into instant wakefulness, without hesitating for a single second, took off at the high port. It ran for all it was worth. Its head was bouncing, its ears pumping up and down, its legs stretching, and its feet pounding the earth as fast as they were able.

I jacked a new round into the breech and returned the rifle to my shoulder. The second elephant presented me with no easy side-head brain shot. Its head was moving – moving forwards and moving up and down – all at the same time. All it gave me was an oblique, angled and moving shot at its brain.

I could see the elephant's one cheekbone. I visualised where the bullet would impact had it presented me with a side-on head shot. I could see the top dead centre of its head from the side-rear. In my mind, I could see the bullet from a side-on head shot coursing upwards from its point of impact – just above the cheekbone – just forward of the ear hole. I dropped an imaginary line down through the centre of the animal's head. Common sense told me that where the two lines crossed must be where the brain lay.

To reach the brain, my bullet would have to impact at a point about one foot back on the neck from the place where the ear attached to the head. I was not sure whether my .375 bullet would penetrate the required distance. I had

never seen Tim take this kind of shot.

I was not sure that I should take it. If I bungled *this* shot I would have a wounded elephant on my hands. I would then have to report my stupidity to Malindela back at Main Camp. I hesitated. Maybe I should just let this elephant run off?

But I had the foresight bead on target. The rear vee-sight was wrapped around it. The imaginary crossed lines were staring me in the face. The elephant was running away putting ever greater distance between us. It was already beyond twenty yards range. It was now or never. I squeezed the trigger.

The report rang loudly in my ears. I dropped the rifle from my shoulder and quickly pushed another round into the breech. My next shot was going to have to be a lung shot. *That* was my next best target. During the flashing moment of time it took me to reload, however, I realised a lung shot would not be necessary.

The instant my bullet impacted, all four of the elephant's legs ceased to function. Running as it was at full speed, its whole body, on the dot, sagged towards the ground. The toes of its front feet dug into the soft Kalahari sand of the forest floor. This dragged its front legs under its chest. Its back legs trailed behind. Its head was high, its tusks thrust forward, and its trunk hung limply beneath its face. The huge beast did a nosedive into the ground. And as it hit the ground a cloud of fine brown dust erupted from its granulated skin.

Even before its carcass hit the ground I saw that its eyes were wide open. It was already staring into the hereafter. The elephant was dead before it hit the ground. My bullet had found its mark.

I can't tell you how big the thrill was that ran through my body as that elephant's body came crashing to the ground. To say that I was *'elated'* would be the most understated description of what I really felt. I had taken a gigantic gamble in electing to hunt these two crop-raiding elephants in the first place. I had no real authority to make the decision that I had made. Had I messed up my shots God knows what would have happened to my career. But I had made that decision. And I had *not* messed up those two shots. Both had been perfectly executed. I had won my gamble. Nobody could fault me in what I had achieved. The hunt that morning, therefore, was another significant and qualifying moment in my big game hunting career.

* * *

Bruce didn't bat an eyelid when I told him about the killing of the three lions. He just nodded his head and commented: *"Good. Well done."*

I then told him I had killed two crop-raiding elephant bulls as well.

Malindela looked up at me – silently. He held his gaze for a very long time. I could almost smell the machinations that were going round and round in his brain. The atmosphere in the office at that moment was gravid with… gravid with I don't know what. My elevated blood pressure pounded in my ears.

"Big bulls?" he asked at last.

I nodded. *"I think… About fifty pounds a side I suppose… Both."* I was then still not very sure about estimating ivory weights.

"Have any trouble?"

"No. Two brain shots – two bulls. One after the other."

"The second one was running away?" Bruce knew the ropes. He had done the same thing many times himself.

"Yes."

"But you took the second shot anyway?"

"Yes. I was sure I could hit the brain – and I did!"

Bruce again looked at me silently – and for another long period of time. His face was deadpan – non-committal. I looked back at him with total composure. I tried to give the impression that I was non-repentant – that I believed I had made the right decision to shoot those two elephants and that I was happy with my performance. Our eyes sparred.

The boss was mulling over what to say. I could feel his thoughts tangibly in the pregnant atmosphere. *Should he reprimand me? Should he praise me?*

"What arrangements did you make for the collection of the ivory?"

He's cuffed it, I thought happily. *He's avoided the issue*. That was a good omen.

"Headman Mazai will be taking charge of all that." I said with not a little relief.

"O.K.," he said finally. *"Well done. Be sure to record the kills in the register."*

"Yes Sir," I said happily.

I escaped from Bruce Austen's office that morning with a smile on my face as big as the ocean. I was walking on Cloud Nine. He had given me his unspoken approval – if somewhat hesitantly – regarding my decision to hunt

the two crop-raiding elephant bulls at Ngamo.

The gates of my big game hunting career stood wide open. From that day onwards Malindela was to trust me, more and more, with the hunting of elephants and buffaloes anywhere and everywhere. I never hunted in Tim's shadow ever again.

* * *

On my way back from Ngamo, after the lion and elephant hunt, I drove across the Ngamo plains *en route* to Makololo. Right in the middle of the plain a group of vultures were feeding on some dead animal. I drove over to see what it was. The birds flew off in a big flurry of flapping wings and flying feathers.

It was a wildebeest cow. The blaze on its forehead was still flecked with orange which told me it was just on two years old. The trackers and I got out of the Land Rover to examine the carcass. We set about trying to see what had killed it. The vultures at that stage were all re-gathering on the tops of some distant leadwood trees.

Suddenly a baby wildebeest that had been lying flat on the sand a hundred yards away stood up and began bleating. We all looked at it. We looked at each other. Then we looked back at the little calf. There was a string of damp cord hanging from the animal's belly. It was new born. Now I knew what had caused the wildebeest's death. It had died giving birth to its first calf. The mother had been too young to have a calf.

I sent the two trackers round, on either side, to get behind the baby animal. I felt sure it would be easy to catch. There didn't seem to be much wrong with it but, I reasoned, it was *just* a newborn baby. It would be easy to catch. The little guy stood and looked from side to side as the two men moved around it. They were fifty yards out on either side.

It continued to bleat. Every time it did so I responded with a similar bleat of my own. Very soon there was a bleating conversation going on between me and the wildebeest calf.

The trackers were in position. They were on either side of the little calf and now well behind it. *"O.K.,"* I shouted to the two men. *"Go catch it."*

As the trackers closed in on the little fellow its bleating intensified – as did my responses. Suddenly it took off racing straight towards me. I was standing with my legs spread, ready to pounce in either direction as the little wildebeest ran past – for that is what I was expecting it to do.

I was surprised at the little fellow's speed and agility. And, as it ran towards me, I began to wonder if we would *ever* catch it.

It came on directly towards me. I reached a hand down to grab it as it careered right past me. I missed. The next thing I knew was it was standing behind me with its head pushed between my legs – looking forwards. It was staring in the direction of the approaching trackers, bleating its head off.

The two Bushman relaxed. And as they began walking towards me they started to laugh.

To catch the little calf all I had to do was to close my legs and fix its body in a scissor grip between my knees. I put both my hands down and caught it around the neck. It struggled a little and looked up at me, its big brown eyes all trusting and happy.

"It's got a new mum," Mbuyotsi said, still laughing, when he and Ben came up to me.

That is exactly what had happened. It had found a mother. The little guy must never have seen or bonded with its real mother. She had probably wandered off the second the calf was born – and then she had died. I had been the first object in the little animal's eyes that it had been able to communicate with.

My wildebeest was a 'she' so I called her *'Connie'* – or rather *'Koni'* – derived from the animal's native name, *nkongkoni*. I raised her at Main Camp on a bottle. And when I wasn't there Betty Cantle did the honours.

Giving my wildebeest that name did not endear me to my future mother-in-law whose first name was Constance. I was, at that stage, still courting her daughter, Barbara. No matter what the indignity Connie Wilkinson may have suffered, however, the name 'Koni' for the wildebeest stuck.

Koni was a fixture at Main Camp for the next two years. At two years old, I rode her, bareback, out on the Main Camp vlei. I tried everything to get her to assimilate into the wild wildebeest herds that roamed across Main Camp vlei every day. She would have none of it. She was a human. She was not one of those ugly animals out there on the plain.

Koni had two homes. One was single quarters. The other was the Cantle home just across the road. She was made welcome in both establishments.

There are many tales I can tell you about Koni. The first one was that we house-trained her. We taught her not to defecate inside the house – either house. To begin with, when she wanted to do a pooh or a piddle, she simply stood up, lifted her tail and did what she had to do wherever she was.

I came to recognize the signs before it happened. Koni would stand up and settle herself, spreading her back legs a little. Then up would go her tail…. At that stage I would grab her scruffy little mane in my left hand, clamp her tail against her backside with my right hand, and rush her ignominiously out the door and into the garden. There I released her and allowed her to do what she needed to do.

It did not take Koni long to learn that she was not allowed to foul either of our happy homes. So, when she wanted to do her business, no matter what it was, she would get up all by herself and walk to the front french doors of whichever house she was in. She would turn around, and with all four feet still inside the house, she would stick her bottom out the door and do her business on the doorstep. Then she would return to the lounge and lie down again on the carpet.

Once Koni had learnt to use the steps of the front door as her toilet, she never again fouled either of our homes. Our respective visitors, however, just had to get used to the idea that they would sometimes have to step over a formidable and fresh wildebeest midden whenever they entered our homes. We did, of course, remove her droppings at regular intervals.

Koni also learned to walk over the single quarter's highly polished cement floors.

The learning process for us humans – just watching – was sometimes painful. In the beginning she slipped and she slid, and re-slid, and re-slid – all over the floor as her tiny hard hooves were unable to find purchase on the polished surface, and her long legs splayed out at all sorts of ugly angles as she continually hit the deck. But she learned to walk across the polished floor remarkably quickly, too.

I would often be sitting in the single quarters lounge when she came onto the verandah from outside. I would hear her dainty little hooves *ticktacking* on the polished cement as, with short and careful footsteps, she made her way towards the sitting room door. And she came visiting all the time. If she saw me going into single quarters, or into Harry and Betty's house, she would follow in my shadow. I was, after all, still and forever her 'Mum'.

Once Koni was inside the single quarters sitting room she was O.K., because in the sitting room was a carpet on the floor with a big lion skin draped on top of it. The fact the skin was that of a lion never bothered her.

The same thing applied in Harry and Betty's house, but in their house there was another attraction. Koni loved to lie down in the company of the

family dog and the Cantle's Siamese cat.

In my absence one day, Babs came a-visiting. She brought with her a British immigrant lady – the wife of a new Rhodesia Railways engine driver – who wanted to see the wild animals of the game reserve.

Babs sat her down in the single quarters lounge and she went off to the kitchen to make some tea. In her absence Koni came on a visit. Imagine what went through that immigrant-lady's head when a half-grown wildebeest suddenly walked into the lounge and started *gnuuuuing* for attention. She never came back to the game reserve ever again!

When she was in her second year, Koni came into oestrus. She was as fat as a pig because she lived on the dry lucerne bales that we had stored under cover behind the workshops. There was always some lucerne kept there to feed captured and/or sick animals and Koni had found out where it was. Her good condition probably brought on early puberty. A wild bull from the Main Camp vlei came to court her. Koni, however, would have nothing to do with the big and ugly old man. She spent all her time running away from him.

We never brought Koni in at night so she wandered around the wideopen Main Camp housing estate all night long. It soon became a commonplace event to hear her grunting, bleating and *gnuuuing* as she resisted her suitor's attentions; and to hear the thunderous beat of their hooves as the bull chased her round and round the houses.

At this time, one of the new building supervisors – one of two who came to revamp the Main Camp environs – took up occupation of a small two-bedroomed staff house which had been built near the old administration office. He had, in fact, just built the house himself. His name was Dick Sharples and his wife's name was (also) Betty. I shall introduce Dick to you properly a little later in my narrative. All I have to tell you now is that he was an elderly London cockney and that he, too, was a very recent immigrant.

A feature of the small house that Dick and his wife moved into was a large and open verandah. The verandah roof was held up, at both front corners, by stout brick pillars. There were no low walls around the edges. The verandah floor comprised smooth and highly polished cement. There was also, at that stage, no fence around the garden perimeter.

On the very first night that Dick and Betty slept in their new house, our friend the big wildebeest bull came in amongst the houses in search of Koni. When he found her the grand chase of the evening started.

Dick and Betty Sharples lay in bed that night and they listened in fear

and bewilderment to the wild ruckus going on outside. They could clearly hear the thunder of wildebeest hooves right outside their bedroom window. They could hear the bleating and the constant *gnuuuuiing* of Koni. They also thought they could hear the grunting exertions of a lion that they believed was chasing the wildebeest round and round the house. That idea put the fear of God into them both.

At one point Koni ran onto the verandah. She quickly tippy-toed over the polished cement floor and ran out the other side. The big bull followed her and, unable to control his feet on the slippery floor, he skidded over the polished surface and crashed into the steel French door that led directly into the house's tiny central sitting room. The door collapsed under the impact of the heavy wildebeest. The glass panels shattered, and shards of glass burst into and scattered throughout the recently furnished room.

Thoroughly shaken, Dick got out of bed and locked the bedroom door. Thereafter, neither he nor his wife ventured out of their bed until well after the sun was up the next morning. They didn't leave the bedroom, in fact, until, through their bedroom window, they could see other people walking around outside.

As her horns were growing Koni took to rubbing her itchy head on my kneecap.

This became a habit. After a while she went up to anybody near her when her horns were itchy, and she rubbed her head on *their* kneecaps, too. When these *'other people'* were ladies, Koni sometimes got her horn tips mixed up with their dresses and she would tear them badly, sometimes even ripping them off the women's waists. This was not a planned strategy nor was it an aggressive action on Koni's part. But it became a problem.

Koni suddenly became very expensive for me. She began to cost me a fortune buying the ladies of Main Camp – and some visitors too – dress-lengths of material to compensate them for the damage that Koni had done.

During one of my absences from Main Camp, therefore, Bruce shipped Koni off to the Livingstone Game Park in Northern Rhodesia, together with several other young wildebeest that Harry caught on the Main Camp vlei. And there, without the close human company she was accustomed to, Koni died within a month of a broken heart. * * *

Being one of the two unmarried game rangers at Main Camp I was never idle. Every day *something* I didn't want to miss was happening. If I wasn't shooting crop-raiding elephants or buffaloes within a hundredmile radius of

Main Camp, or shooting elephants and buffaloes in the Tjolotjo TTL to reduce the park's overall numbers, I was shooting stockkilling lions, leopards and hyenas on the commercial cattle ranches or in the tribal trust lands that surrounded the game reserve. Religiously, every week when I was in camp, I shot two buffalo bulls for labour rations in the *gusu* near Dett.

The ration buffalo hunts were always reserved for me when I was *'in town'*. I did not object. Sometimes, for weeks on end, I was on horse patrol. Then I found myself cutting new Land Rover tracks into one remote part of the park or another. And sometimes I was involved in escorting V.I.P.s or scientists around the park. But, most of the time, I was available to shoot the two buffalo bulls for rations on a Friday.

At about the time I got back from shooting the three stock-killing lions, and the two crop-raiding elephant bulls, at Ngamo, I was asked to escort a scientist from the University of Rhodesia in and about the Main Camp environs. He was an entomologist called Dr. John Weir. I was tasked to accompany him and to protect him from an improbable attack by wild animals whilst he was going about his business. He was undertaking research that concerned the insects of the national park.

His project involved setting up huge linen screens at various places in the park, screens that fed like a funnel into gigantic metal milk churns. Above the screen funnels he erected lights on poles the purpose of which was to attract insects at night. These components made up his 'insect traps'.

At first he experimented with different coloured lights to find out which colour attracted the most insects. When he had chosen the light that he wanted, he started the experiments most seriously.

John set up his insect traps in several different habitat types within reasonable distance of Main Camp. Some were on the open grasslands of the ten-mile tourist drive. Some were in the msusu scrub. Some were in the heavy *gusu* – in the teak forest proper. Electricity to each trap was supplied by a small portable generator.

Part of the experiment involved measuring the distance each light penetrated into the local habitat. This information gave him some idea of the total area, in each habitat, from which the insects caught in the traps were likely to have come.

I was, at first, somewhat bemused by all his explanations – and, to be frank, a bit disinterested too – but when we returned on the morning after the

first night's trapping I began to sit up and take notice. We found all the milk churns variously filled up with all kinds of insects. In one night, in just three traps, he must have captured several hundred thousand insects of every conceivable kind and species.

I helped seal and 'gas' the insects in the churns with a special a preservative.

Each churn was labelled with a coded number. And every morning we replaced the 'used' churns with new ones. This procedure was repeated every day for a whole week.

John had students back in Salisbury whose job it was going to be to dry the insects, to weigh them, and to classify them according to species. Only when all this was done, he said, would he be able to analyse the results.

Six months later, long after I had forgotten about Dr. John Weir and his insects, I received a letter from him thanking me for my assistance. Inside the letter was a copy of his synoptic report detailing the results of his research.

Much of what the report said was *gubble-de-gook* to me but its conclusion was astounding. The report said there was an infinitely greater biomass (total weight) of insects in Hwange National Park than the total weight of all the wild animals in the park put together. I cannot remember the figure now but he said the weight of insects was several hundred times greater than the weight of all the large wild animals combined.

I was so impressed by this fact I have never forgotten it. It stuck in my mind and it remained there to be retrieved two years later. John Weir's report only took on a practical relevance for me when I was given another scientific report written by another scientist. How this second report came into my hands I cannot remember but it was to prove of great significance in my life. The second report was by Dr. Hugh Cott. It concerned his research findings on, among other things, the diets of crocodiles in Northern Rhodesia.

I shall come back to this subject later – at a stage in the narrative that is more appropriate.

* * *

There was still water in the bigger pans at the beginning of April that year so Bruce sent Tim out on a horse patrol with the same task that he had given me in March. He was given a list of pans to visit and he had to plot Land Rover tracks into them.

This was Tim's first horse patrol since I had been deployed to Main

Camp – and it was his last. He surprised me on his day of departure by coming out wearing cowboy chaps made from tanned lion skins.

I myself never wore long trousers when I went on horse patrol. Long pants tore badly when you pushed through even light sinanga. I always rode in short pants. This meant that, when I came to heavy brush, I had to get off my horse and walk the horse through the impeding vegetation. Long trousers were also very hot to wear in Hwange's tropical climate.

Tim wore short pants under his chaps. The chaps were, of course, open behind the full length of the leather leggings. So although heavy, the chaps would still be cool and I understood immediately that they would be very practical.

Nevertheless, in his chaps Tim looked comical. A vision of John Wayne in a Hollywood movie flashed through my mind. I had to smile. Even so, I believed his chaps were a good idea. I thought that that is what I should get for myself, too. I imagined myself riding old Turk wearing lion skin chaps, and pushing through the hookhorns and the sicklebush sinanga without getting a single scratch on my bare legs.

I had three new lion skins that the Bushmen were already tanning for me. I could easily sacrifice two of them – but I didn't. I never made myself a pair of chaps and I continued to wear short trousers on horse patrol. The lion skins went to my mother who used them to decorate the lounge in our family home on the farm at Karoi.

A tourist, seeing Tim in all his regalia, immediately called him 'fancy pants' – but then the tourist did not have to do what Tim was going to be doing over the next several weeks. The tourist had no idea about the kind of heavy sinanga that Tim and his horse were going to have to plough through in the days and weeks ahead. * * *

No sooner had Tim departed than Bruce received a report about some serious elephant damage to the new veterinary game fence that was being erected on our Tjolotjo boundary. The veterinary official constructing the fence was pulling his hair out. He had made good progress. During the first three months of his task the man had succeeded in erecting the fence from the railway line at Ngamo, to a point ten miles down the Sehumi drainage line. This was a signal achievement. The longer the fence became, however, the less progress he was able to make because, behind him, the elephants were demolishing the fence faster than he could erect it at the front.

Bruce had already asked me to prepare for a patrol to Makololo and

beyond. I was to take a five-ton lorry load of labourers, complete with tentage and food enough for *at least* two weeks away. My task was to open up the route I had marked in that area on my last horse patrol. It would give us Land Rover access to both Hwecau and Tum-Tum Pans. I was then to take the track beyond Tum-Tum and down the drainage line where we had caught our ducks for supper. It was to then connect with the old Main Camp-to-Lebuti track at Sitchetche.

Bruce, who had himself taken the elephant complaint call from Salisbury just minutes before, summonsed me to his office before I left. *"The elephants are knocking the hell out of the new game fence on the Sehumi,"* he told me just as soon as I had entered his office. *"I would like you to visit the veterinary chap who is building the fence. He's camped somewhere on the Sehumi. Find out what the problem is and see if you can do something about it."*

He looked at me silently for a while. I could see he wanted to say something more. He changed his mind. *"Just remember,"* he concluded. *"No shooting of elephant on the game reserve side of the Sehumi."*

"And the road? Cutting the road to Hwecau from Makololo…"

"You're taking Mbuyotsi with you?"

"Yes."

"And Munene is your lorry driver?"

"Yes,"

"Well then… Get them on the go and leave them to it. Mbuyotsi knows the route you marked to Hwecau and Munene knows how to supervise the boys. Let the two of them go to it whilst you are attending to the jumbos."

This was the first time Bruce had actually instructed me to go hunting elephants on my own. I was elated. It was proof that he had, at last, accepted the fact that I was capable of handling elephants on my own. It was the final manifestation which told me that I was starting to *'make it'* as a big game hunter.

* * *

My tales-and-trails have brought us hunting at Ngamo, and *'on the Sehumi'*, many times in the narrative already, and we will be returning here many more times in the pages ahead. It is appropriate, therefore, that I properly describe this unique feature of the Hwange landscape. Understanding what *'the Sehumi'* is will enable you, the reader, to better picture yourself in my

company on the hunting adventures that we shall be sharing.

Seven-eighths of Hwange is Kalahari sand. This region takes the topographical form of a series of long, ancient and now stable sand dunes that stretch right across the park from east to west. The northern slopes of the sand dunes are slightly steeper than the southern slopes. This tells us the dunes were formed, in millennia past, as a consequence of southerly winds blowing sand up from the Kalahari Desert.

The dunes vary in size. Generally speaking, they are flatter and wider in the north of the park and much narrower in the south. They are somewhere in the region of eighty miles long and between one (S) and five (N) miles wide. Between the dunes there are equally long depressions that we called *'drainage lines'* – although they *'drain'* nowhere. No water flows on the Kalahaeri sand. The flat tops of the dunes are clothed in teak forests *(Baikiaea plurijuga)*. The sloping side of every dune is bedecked with a small belt of msusu scrub *(Terminalia sericea)*. The drainage lines are very narrow, compared to the greater breadth of the dunes, and they have harder and blacker soils. The soils in the drainage lines are, therefore, richer than the dune sands, and they support grasslands, mopani woodlands *(Colophospermum mopane)* and camel thorn trees *(Acacia erioloba)*. All along the drainage lines there are myriad strings of seasonal pans, some large some small. Under natural conditions, Hwange's pans fill with rainwater during the rains – November to April. They are dry between May and October. boreholes have been drilled near some of the bigger pans which are now artificially kept full of water throughout the year. These are the game waterholes so well known to tourists. Without these waterholes there would be very few game animals and probably no elephants at all, in this the greater part of the national park.

Over vast periods of geological time, Hwange has experienced a range of very wet and very dry periods. The wet periods helped to stabilize the sand dunes and to clothe them in vegetation. During some exceptionally wet periods, the drainage lines filled with water and it overflowed here and there. The flooding waters broke though the dunes, one after the other, spilling the excess water to the south. These ancient rivers cut continuous right-angled rifts right across the parallel east-west sand dune patterns. The Sehumi drainage, the Linkwasha vlei drainage and the Kennedy vlei drainage, are the three biggest *'fossil river'* drainages in the park.

These *'fossil'* drainages were partly re-covered in drifting sands during

the next dry period but the land never lost the drift of the old river courses. Their banks softened, however, and they developed the same plant profiles, on either side, that now occur on the drainage lines that exist between the dunes. In all cases, these *fossil rivers* still exhibit a drainage basin that slopes to the south. When you traverse the bottoms of these fossil rivers, therefore, you will find yourself walking through grassland. When you move out of the grassland, to the east or to the west, you move through slopes comprising msusu scrub. And when you climb out of the msusu scrub you pass into the ancient teak forests that exist on the tops of all the fossil dunes.

The Sehumi *'fossil river'* represents the national park's eastern boundary. It is the narrowest and deepest of all the fossil rivers, yet it still contains seasonal pans all along its length. The Sehumi begins its long journey at the southern end of the Ngamo plains.

The Veterinary Department began building its game control fence at the railway line just west of the Ngamo railway siding. From that point it moved southwards, through the Ngamo Plains and the adjacent teak forests, to the beginning of the Sehumi *fossil river*. The fence then followed the winding course of the Sehumi, variously westwards and southwards, on its way to the Botswana border. * * *

Driving down the new game fence the next day, from Ngamo into the upper reaches of the Sehumi drainage, was a revelation. The upright fence standards were heavy mopani and msusu poles cut from the local bush. The droppers, at three foot intervals in between, were msusu saplings. Both mopani and msusu have one thing in common. They are immune from attack by termites.

The fence stood seven feet tall. Its pole standards were sunk three feet into the ground and spaced fifteen feet apart. Special straining-post structures were erected along its length – never more than 1000 yards apart. Its eleven parallel lines of shiny new wires glistened in the sunlight. The wires were oval, 12 x 14 gauge steel, with a high tensile strength of 1250 foot-pounds. That meant each wire needed to be pulled by a weight of 1250 pounds before it snapped.

The wires were elastic. They were capable of considerable prolongation and after being stretched they immediately returned to their former lengths. When they broke under pressure, however, they acted like springs. The broken ends *twanged* away from each other and the torn ends cut like knives into whatever flesh or hide they encountered. This was why, when we first

started shooting out the elephants of Tjolotjo, we killed several bulls with severe and suppurating wounds across their faces.

Once erected, the fence became a steel barrier to most of Hwange's game animals, including the elephant cowherds. Even when the big cows did managed to cross the line, their calves and the younger animals could not follow them. This effectively anchored the cowherds on one side of the fence or the other. So, the new game fence either fenced-in the cowherds, or it fenced them out.

The game fence was never really a deterrent to the big bulls, however, which developed ingenious ways for getting across the barrier.

Some very big bulls simply walked over the top of the fence. They pushed the top strands down with their trunks and they stepped over the wires with their front feet. Once their front legs were over the barrier they dragged their bellies and their back legs over behind them. The elasticized wires then sprang back to their original positions – although the nearest fence poles to the crossing point then stood skew in the ground.

Other big bulls learnt to push the standard poles over and to stand on top of them. This laid all eleven strands of the fence flat on the ground at the same time, and none of the wires broke. Then, by walking on top of and along the length of the pole, they were able to cross the barrier without much ado. When they finally stepped off the fence pole on the far side of the barrier, the whole fence sprang right back into an upright position. Once again, however, this left a lot of the standard poles awry.

Sometimes a group of bulls got angry with the fence and they demolished whole sections of it for a hundred yards or more along its length. This made it easy for the cowherds – and buffalo – to cross from one side to the other.

I did not get to see the man who was erecting the fence at all that day. Long before I got to him the damaged sections of the fence told their own stories. And where I found fresh elephant tracks Ben and I followed them into the Tjolotjo gusu. Those that had crossed back into the game reserve I could do nothing about.

We shot two elephant bulls that first day. The first one was standing on top of the vehicle track that ran alongside the fence. We saw it from some distance off and I stopped the Land Rover long before the noise of its engine could have disturbed it. Nevertheless, the elephant had heard the approach of the vehicle and, when I first saw the animal it was standing perfectly still, listening.

I quietly climbed out of the Land Rover and tested the wind. There was a light breeze blowing obliquely towards the elephant down the road. The dust of the ash, however, slowly drifted off to the side, through the wires of the fence into the game reserve. There was no way therefore we were going to be able to approach the elephant from our current position.

I pushed my rifle through the fence and stood it up against the nearest pole. I then tried to climb through the lower wire strands at about hip level. I got a shock. There was no give in the wires. They were as taught as steel rods. I tried to push my way through but could not get my bum between the constraining wires, and my crotch came up short against the bottom strand. Had I persevered and pushed harder I would have emasculated myself.

So Ben and I quietly climbed up the stiff wires to the top of the fence, and we descended down into the game reserve on the other side. I was surprised at how little effect our weight had on the wires.

My respect for the strength of the veterinary game fence started from that moment on.

Ben and I walked across the heavily grazed Sehumi grassland and entered the msusu scrub on the far side. Concealed from the elephant's view, we made our way down the drainage line to a point just beyond where the elephant was standing. We then moved over to the fence and, alone, I walked back towards my quarry. I used the line of upright poles, and the wire, as my screen. The wind was then blowing directly into my face.

The elephant continued to stand quietly on the road. It seemed to have forgotten about the noise of the Land Rover's engine. It was now busy shovelling up small piles of soil with its front-foot toenails, and throwing the dust up and over its body with its trunk. Its ears were waving about in a desultory fashion, slapping gently on the rough skin of its shoulders. Great issues of breath exhaled noisily – hollowly – from the end of its trunk.

I was able to walk, very slowly and quietly, to within fifteen paces of the giant animal without being detected. The angle of the fence was enough to keep my approaching figure obscured. The elephant was standing broadside on to me with its backside up against the wires.

I pushed the barrel of my rifle through the wires and leant up against the heavy fence pole at my side. It was an easy side-head brain shot.

The elephant fell towards me and it crashed into the dust of the Land Rover track. Its eyes were wide open before it hit the ground. The elephant had died the moment my bullet smashed into its brain. After its body hit the

ground the elephant's top back leg began kicking in the air.

I made particular note of the fact that the elephant had fallen towards me. I had noticed that that had happened before with other elephants that both Tim and I had shot together. When standing in a relaxed manner an instant-killing side-head brain shot, more often than not, resulted in the elephant falling towards the hunter.

After mulling over this regular occurrence I came to the conclusion that the elephant falls towards the hunter because, upon feeling the impact of the bullet (before it smashes into its brain) the animal's natural and instant reaction is to resist the punch of the bullet. When the bullet then kills the elephant its body's automatic reaction is already in operation.
This causes the elephant's body to continue falling towards the hunter. Whether this is true or not I have no idea.

* * *

One mile further along the fence we came across the fresh tracks of another elephant bull. The spoor meandered on and off the road as it had, seemingly, wandered quietly and leisurely down the fence line away from Ngamo. I sat Ben on the Land Rover's left front mudguard. He kept his position by hanging onto the spare wheel on the bonnet lid with his right hand. This allowed him to peer down at the tracks as we travelled slowly down the road.

Every now and again Ben signalled for me to stop – when the tracks disappeared off the road. He then climbed down onto *terra firma* and went into the bush at the side of the road. There he quickly picked up the lost tracks on a new game trail that was developing alongside and parallel to the road. He followed the spoor on foot until the elephant returned to the road. Then he climbed back onto the Land Rover's mudguard and we continued along the road as before.

Then, suddenly, the tracks left the Sehumi. They went directly into the teak forest, beyond the open msusu/grassland scrub, to the east.

We left the Land Rover standing, unattended, on the side of the sandy Sehumi road. The elephant walked straight up the steep and sandy slope, through the msusu scrub, and into the heavy gusu. Here the sinanga was particularly thick. The jumbo pushed through it all in a direct straight line. Ben and I had to wind our way through the thorns in a tortuous manner, picking the best routes we could find.

This elephant was moving. It was moving in a dead straight line and it

was moving fast.

Two hours later we came across a pile of fresh elephant dung. I kicked one lump open and pressed the backs of my fingers into it. It wasn't hot but there was no vestige of the dawn chill in it either.

I looked at Ben and, without a word, pointed to the open dung. He too pressed the backs of his fingers onto it. He squinted up at the sun, now high in the sky. Then he indicated with the open palm of his hand facing upwards, just where he believed the sun had been located when the elephant had passed by this way.

Ten o'clock or thereabouts! That was the tracker's estimate. The elephant had dropped its dung here at about ten o'clock that morning.

I looked at my watch. It was now five minutes before twelve o'clock. The jumbo was two hours ahead of us.

Something about our guesstimated time-frame rankled. Then it came to me. We had shot the first elephant that morning just before nine o'clock and it had only been a few miles away from where this elephant had left the road and moved up into the gusu.

"It heard us shooting the other elephant," I spoke softly to myself, and to Ben, as I looked down at the dung. Then I looked at Ben directly. *"That is why it left the Sehumi track and moved straight into the gusu."* Ben smiled and nodded his head. He agreed.

I tested the wind. It was still blowing in a general southerly direction. It was a gentle but firm breeze blowing from our left to our right. I was happy with that.

"*Landa."* We set off again on the elephant's spoor.

After *another* two hours we were still following the same set of tracks. The elephant was still moving in an easterly direction but it had veered somewhat to the south. It was still moving very purposefully. I had by now worked out that the animal was agitated – very agitated. I was now quite sure it had left the Sehumi when it had heard the shot that killed the first elephant. That could only mean one thing. This elephant had been hunted before. It knew all about the sound of gunfire.

"Ehmah," I called Ben to a stop. *"Bwisah josak." Bring the waterbag.*

I took a long swig from the canvas water bag and handed it back to the Bushman. He put the nipple to his lips and took a drink himself. It had been a long, hard and hot day. I had been determined to catch this elephant but I could feel he was now slipping out of our grasp. We had been at it now for

four whole hours and we were still no closer to our quarry.

I took the ash bag out of my shirt pocket and tweaked it in the wind. I watched the puff of white dust floating off on the breeze. Ben watched it, too, shaking his head. The wind had changed. The jumbo was now moving with the breeze.

Ben and I looked at each other. *"Khandjaahn?"* I asked of him. *What do you think?*

The Bushman again shook his head. *"We're not going to catch this one,"* he opined matter-of-factly.

I looked off into the forest in the direction the elephant had gone.

Damn! Well jumbo, you win this one, I thought, *but we'll get together again one of these days….*

The sun was low on the horizon by the time we got back to the Sehumi. We then discovered we still had a five-mile trek along the road to where we had left the Land Rover. Walking through lose Kalahari sand all day long is heavy work. Just the thought of having to now plod through another five miles of it was soul destroying.

Both Ben and I were deadbeat. We trudged along the twin wheel tracks of the sandy road, side by side. We said nothing. We just walked along wearily, each lost in our own thoughts. The josak was empty so I carried the bag rolled up in one hand. Ben carried the rifle. The cartridge belt about my waist was cumbersomely heavy. The edge of the leather was cutting painfully into the top of my hip bones,

One mile slogged into two, then three. The sun set. It began to get dark.

"Hah!" Ben said suddenly coming to a stop. I looked at him. He was gazing towards the edge of the teak forest to our far right. He looked at me. As our eyes met he lifted his hand and pointed.

There, a few hundred yards ahead of us, were three elephant bulls browsing along the forest edge.

I almost snatched the rifle out of Ben's hands. I lifted it and aimed the weapon at the elephants. I did so just to see if I could still see the sights. They were clear enough.

"*Come… Let's get them."*

Ben took out the spare cartridge pack from the breast pocket of his shirt. I pulled a round from the cartridge belt at my waist. I fed it into the rifle's breech on top of the shells in the magazine. That gave me five rounds in the

weapon.

It is at times like these that I always wonder where one's sudden energy comes from. In one short instant of time my circumstances had changed. A moment before I had been having difficulty finding the energy to put one foot in front of the other. The next I was hurrying along the road determined to quickly close the gap with the elephants before all the light was gone.

As I raced along, I pulled the ash bag from my shirt pocket and stopped long enough to flick it hard to one side of my body. A cloud of white wood ash dust hung in the air. I stood still for a moment and I watched it. It just stayed there in one place slowly descending straight down to the ground.

There was no wind. I did not have to bother about the wind. I put the ash bag back in my pocket and hurried on. Ben almost ran along behind me struggling to keep up.

As we drew closer I eased off the road and angled through the grass and msusu towards the elephants. The whole grassland and msusu scrub region that lay between the forest edge and the fence was criss-crossed with new elephant trails. They all ran variously parallel with the fence up and down the Sehumi drainage.

Subconsciously I made a note. It never used to be like this before the fence. So the barrier was clearly having a deterrent effect on the elephants' movements.

The nearest elephant was standing with its backside towards me, so I was able to draw up quite close behind it. I was quickly within rifle range. All I had to do to kill this elephant, then, was to get myself into a position where I could 'see' its brain.

The other two bulls were standing a little way off beyond my target, spread out. Both faced directly on to me. All three of them had their heads down and their trunk 'fingers' were busy nipping off green shoots that were sprouting from the sand.

I eased round the elephant's right hand side from its rear. That was the side closest to the forest edge. I moved slowly because the more I gained a side-on position, the more did I become exposed to the elephant's right eye. The bushes were thicker on the forest side, so when I was amongst them I was able to hide my presence better.

Ben remained on my right hand side, the packet of spare ammunition now in his left hand. Two shiny brass cartridges glistened in the fingers of his

right hand, ready to be passed on to me should I need them.

My relocation to the side of the elephant improved with every passing moment. Slowly, softly, I wended my way around and through the well-leafed young teak trees.

Without warning the elephant spun round. A huge whooshing sound erupted as he expelled the air from his lungs. For a moment he stood still. Then he took several fast and aggressive paces towards me. He stopped suddenly and stood facing me. His head was up high. His trunk hung straight down from the bridge of his face. His ears were spread stiffly. And he looked down his nose directly on to me.

I was at that stage just five paces in front of him. My rifle was at my shoulder. I had a huge urge to just pull the trigger. I understood unequivocally that his every sense was at that moment focused on me. A soft, angry, mewling growl emitted from his throat. I stood my ground, trembling but firm. Fear ran around inside my gut like a decapitated snake. A sudden tightness gripped my chest. My breathing was shallow – almost imperceptible. Panic erupted deep inside my head. I grabbed it quickly and suppressed it with everything that I had.

The elephant was just too damn close for comfort.

I was frightened. I was in trouble. I knew that. But I still believed I could handle the situation. Deep down I understood that if this elephant had wanted to attack me it would have done so immediately. It had started to, then it had changed its mind. Nevertheless, the tension was enormous. My whole body was trembling. My hands were vibrating on my rifle.

My eyes crawled all over the elephant's face, searching for the place where I must place my bullet. The butt of my rifle remained tight on my shoulder. The barrel was pointing at the elephant's face. I could have pulled off a shot at any moment, but I needed to 'see' the brain first.

Where was his damn brain?

I had never before attempted a frontal brain shot at this angle. The elephant's head was held up so high! So very high! He was a big bull and he towered above me, huge, like a colossus. I had no idea where his tiny brain was hidden behind that huge and frightening face. No idea at all!

The elephant shook his head and banged his ears noisily against his shoulders. He trumpeted stridently. It was a frightening moment.

He is probably wondering why I don't run away. The thought flashed into and out of my brain like a wisp of smoke in a high wind.

The elephant took another step forward. He swung his trunk, the tip flicking towards me like the end-thong of a lashing whip. For a moment the trunk held firm. Its probing tip was directed at my face. Stretched out, its splayed fingers were no more than ten feet from my nose. It looked as though he was trying to smell me. Hot air from his lungs washed over me.

The gap between us was far too close.

I stood my ground. That action – the stepping forward and the flicking of the trunk – was something I had seen elephants do many times. I had seen them do it to buffaloes and to lions. I had seen them do it to a wildebeest. I had even seen a young elephant bull step forward and flick his trunk at a Blacksmith Plover when the bird had refused to get off its eggs and move out the leviathan's way.

That stepping forward and flicking-with-the-trunk action was a bluff. It was a demonstration. A displacement reaction! It was a sign that told me the elephant really didn't know what to do next. It made me feel a whole lot better.

Nevertheless, the precipitous change in our circumstances had taken me completely by surprise. I had not been ready for it. One second I had been in charge of the proceedings. The next I was not. It made me feel very inadequate.

I felt most vulnerable.

I musn't panic, I said to myself stoically. *I mustn't panic*.

Still my sights ranged over the middle front portion of the elephant's face. I was looking for some indicator that would tell me where the brain lay in that huge head from this altogether new-to-me angle.

I could see the elephant's eyes. I could see the surfaces of its cheekbones ranging back from the front of its face. I could not see the ear holes.

I was holding my ground. But, inside, all was not what it seemed to be. My nerves were riding on a very sharp edge. My whole body was quaking.

A kaleidoscope of thoughts raced through and around my brain. I was thrust back to my very first elephant hunting experience at Macaha. Although I had considerably more experience now than I had then, the situation I now found myself in was, like it had been at Macaha, very new to me. It was far too new for me to handle with any degree of confidence. I had not ever before been confronted by an elephant face to face, like this, at such close quarters. I felt decidedly uncomfortable. Not knowing where the animal's brain lay wrecked whatever belief I had in myself. We were at stand-off. The

elephant held the advantage.

I gauged the space between us. It was no space at all.

At that moment I understood why the Hwange game rangers were eased into hunting elephants on their own by way of an extensive handson training programme.

I wished Tim Braybrooke, my training mentor, was standing by my side. But he wasn't. I was all on my own. It was a *'moment of truth'* for me. It was me or the elephant. One of us was going to die in the next few moments.

The other two jumbos were now standing watching me, too. Their heads were up, their ears were spread. They were also peering at me down their noses. They were intimidating, adding to the tension, but they represented no immediate danger. They were both over forty yards distant.

The animal that stood directly in front of me was the one I was concerned about. Five paces – less! It was just too damn close for comfort. It was well within the jumbo's power to flatten me into the ground. If that were to happen it would be all over in a matter of one or two seconds.

My rifle was still at my shoulder. The foresight bead, snuggled neatly into the back rear vee-sight, was caressing the elephant's face. *Where should I place my damn bullet?* If *push-came-to-shove* and the elephant did charge me down, I could always just blast a shot off into his face. It *might* be enough to turn him. That was plan B. Plan A was to kill him cleanly with my first shot.

Then, suddenly, strangely, like a rising veil, my scare lifted. I was back in full control of my nerves. I was thinking rationally again. I was still jittery but no longer verging on panic.

The hesitant stalemate was, however, short-lived. The elephant again, suddenly and silently, dropped his head and made a short sharp rush at me. One step then he stopped. He was virtually right on top of me now. I almost pulled the trigger but didn't. He again flicked his trunk forwards. The trunk tip came at me low down, towards my crotch, but it was still well short of a contact.

Then the elephant stepped back a pace or two. *Was he going to run?* He lifted his head up very high and he again peered down his nose at me. I prepared myself to take him in the side of the head the moment he turned to run.

Full confidence returned with a rush.

I stood my ground. *Those last two rushes had been mock charges!*

If this elephant wants to frighten me, I thought, he needs to be made of sterner stuff.

I was truly now back in control.

The elephant growled. There was a sudden, subtle, change in his demeanor. It was immediately threatening. It brought back a twinge of fear. *He was making up his mind to attack me seriously – or he was going to turn and to run away.*

The next rush, if it came, would not be a mock charge. It would be the real McCoy. I could not risk that happening. The time had come for me to shoot this elephant.

He nodded his head – down-up – then up it went again, very high. He was about to rush forward and flatten me into the ground. The big elephant bull had made a decision! I knew it. I could feel it.

I now, myself, had a decision to make.

My vision as to where the brain was located shifted. Then my sights returned to where I *really* thought the brain should be. I pulled the trigger.

The big elephant bull staggered with the thump of the bullet. For a brief moment the slug had stunned him but he didn't go down. I had marginally missed the brain. It must have been close to have had that effect. But the elephant was just too big a bull to be seriously rocked by the penetrating clout of a mere 300 grain lump of steel-and-lead. His skull was a honeycombed bone structure filled with fluids. It was designed to take heavy punishment from the impacting heads of other big bulls when they fought.

The 300 grain .375 bullet had the penetration to reach the brain from most angles. I had learnt that. Now I knew something else about it. It was greatly deficient in knockdown power. If it didn't hit the brain, the bullet would *not* knock a big elephant bull down.

I jacked another round into the breech. The elephant dropped his head the instant the bullet struck. A brief look of disbelief flashed out of his eyes. He backed off hurriedly, and he spun his giant body away from me. The speed at which he turned amazed me but when he *had* turned I was ready for him.

On my right hand side, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the other two elephant running back into the teak forest. My now wounded quarry was clearly intent on following them. He had forgotten whatever his intentions had been towards me. He now just wanted to make good his escape.

For a brief moment I had my elephant swinging away and broadside on

to me. It was a window of opportunity that I could not miss. In a moment my chance would be gone. In the next second he would have spun away from me far too much. Then I would have to choose between a snap angled shot into the brain, through the neck, from somewhere behind the ear, or having a go at the lungs.

My rifle was up and ready to fire. My sights sought out that easy-to-remember formula for the side-head brain shot. *Draw a line between the ear hole and the eye… one third forward of the earhole…* I squeezed the trigger. The elephant did a nosedive into the ground. His eyes were staring into eternity.

Huge relief swept over me. The danger and the tension of the hunt were over. I had been given another kind of reprieve, too. Once again, I had escaped from the ignominy of having to return to Main Camp to tell Bruce Austen that I had wounded an elephant.

From the time the elephant first saw me, to the time I killed him, no more than ten seconds of time had elapsed.

It was dark by the time Ben and I got back to the Land Rover. On our way past Ngamo I called in to see Headman Mazai at his village. I told him about the two dead elephants and where they were located. I told him that his people could have the meat. And I asked him to collect the four tusks for me. That done, Ben and I proceeded through the gate in the fence on the railway-fireguard track. That was the bottleneck that gave us access to the game reserve side of the Ngamo plains. From the gate it was eight miles to our camp at Makololo.

After supper I lay on my stretcher and I looked up into the dark shroud of the inky sky. I was exhausted but, as always, exhilarated, too. This was my most relaxing time of day. Half-awake and half-asleep I watched for the movement of sputniks and of shooting stars in the sparkling heavens. And the tensions that had built up inside me during the hunt sloughed off.

That night I mulled over the day's hunts. I had shot another two elephant bulls. That was great. My score and my experience were building up nicely. But my mind was more acutely occupied with the sure-fire knowledge that I *still* did not know *exactly* where the comparatively small brain is located in an elephant's gigantic head. I had bungled the frontal brain shot on the elephant bull I had killed at dusk. I resolved to do better.

There was an old dry elephant skull behind the workshops at Main

Camp. I decided there and then to cut it in half when I got back. I was going to work out – to my own satisfaction – *exactly* where an elephant's brain is located. And I made a vow. I told myself I was going to perfect the frontal brain shot no matter what. I determined that I would learn how to *consistently* find the brain from *any* angle.

* * *

I was now officially out of the training phase of my elephant hunting career. I had learnt all the basics from Tim Braybrooke. He had taught me how one goes about killing an elephant. However, the more I hunted elephants the more I understood there were huge gaps in my training and my capabilities. After my last hunt I *knew* that I was only *really* confident when I was presented with a side-head brain shot. I also knew that I always manipulated the approaches to my quarry so that I could position myself for that particular shot. I had discovered, today, that that was not always manageable.

Superficially it may seem incongruous that I should have been allowed to go out on my own in such an obviously deficient state of readiness. However, had it been necessary that I be taught *everything* that I needed to know about hunting elephants my training period would have lasted the rest of my life.

I then realised that *that* was exactly what was happening. I was putting *myself* through the first phase of what was to become a lifetime of training. I had started a journey on a very long self-teaching learning curve. I was to understand more and more about hunting elephants every time I hunted one. After every hunt I understood a little more. After every hunt I became a little more competent – a little more confident. This was to happen for the rest of my life.

The only difference between the direct training programme that I underwent with Tim Braybrooke, and what the future held, was that I was now going to fill in all the gaps with experiences that I generated myself.

1961, 1962 and 1963 represented my maturation period. Each year I was to get better and better. I was discovering that maturing as a big game hunter was a process that was both exhilarating and fascinating – and sometimes terrifying, too.

* * *

I spent the next two days with the boys on the road. On day one, under Mbuyotsi's and Munene's supervision, they had cut a five-mile long trace from Makololo through the teak forest as far as Hwecau Pan. I was able to

get to Hwecau in my Land Rover by the end of the second day. Mine was the first wheeled vehicle to have ever penetrated this far to the east in the central zone. The new track had followed, for the most part, the slash marks on the tree trunks that Kitso had made on our horse patrol earlier in the year.

On day three the men began the real slog of the exercise. They now had to widen the track to accommodate the passage of a five-ton Bedford lorry. The next stage was to prepare the route for road construction with a mechanized grader.

All this meant digging deep into the sandy substrate to remove the roots of the many saplings the men had cut off at ground level; and they had to cleanly stump out the bigger trees that had to be removed. When the lorry was able to travel along the track those high-up tree branches that impeded the lorry's progress were sawn off, or chopped off with felling axes, by a gang of natives standing on the lorry's flat back decking.

By the end of Day Four the gang was only half way to Hwecau so I left them to it under Munene's supervision. They had the trace track to follow now and they knew exactly what to do.

And… I had elephants to shoot on the Sehumi fence line.

* * *

The next day I took Ben *and* Mbuyotsi with me. I had now put all my doubts behind me. Of the two Bushmen, I was convinced that Ben was the better tracker. Deep down I had known this for some time but I had been reluctant to admit it. I could no longer deny what was so glaringly obvious. My reluctance to accept this truth was because I liked Mbuyotsi, as a person, better. Deep down in my heart I had *wanted* my tracker to be Mbuyotsi.

Ben was small, wiry and not very strong – but he was as fit as a fiddle and quite able to keep up with me at my normal walking pace. He was, however, taciturn with a dour personality. It was difficult to enter into conversation with him. Even so, I did *not dislike* him. I just liked Mbuyotsi more.

I had for some time been favouring Ben as my tracker-of-choice. That could only lead to one thing. Ben and I were going to become a firm ranger/tracker team; like Tim Braybrooke and Japan were a team; like Bruce Austen and Sumbe were a team. Indeed the Malindela/Sumbe combination had remained strong even though Bruce was doing very little hunting nowadays.

Ben and I had not yet gelled, but it was happening!

Mbuyotsi was a bigger man than Ben and he was immensely strong for his relatively squat stature. He had a charismatic and buoyant personality and he had good leadership qualities. I believed he could also be trained to handle a rifle. I missed him when he wasn't with me. I *liked* the man. I *wanted* him to be with me every time I hunted dangerous big game.

I was beginning to wonder if, maybe, Mbuyotsi, Ben and I might forge a three-some – a three man team. *Wouldn't that be something*, I thought. At the same time I was sure Malindela would not approve. Nevertheless, I was going to try to *make it happen – de facto*. It could by chance become a reality by reason of *fait accompli*.

Both trackers carried full josaks. One was for me. One was for them to share. Mbuyotsi carried the 9.3 Mauser as my spare rifle. I had learnt that it was a good idea to have a spare rifle. Every experienced game ranger carried a spare rifle when hunting. It was even better when the spare weapon was carried by a man who could use it. Something about the man made me believe that Mbuyotsi already knew how to use a rifle. He was certainly very comfortable carrying one. I decided that I must ask him one of these nights when we were all sitting around the campfire telling stories.

We travelled down the Sehumi track right alongside the game fence. Mazai's people were still picking the bones of the first elephant I had shot three days before. The skull lay upside down on the ground. The tusks had been removed. There were lots of dismembered bones scattered about and large panels of discarded skin were lying on the ground. The stench was sweet, not unpleasant.

A lot of people were still gathered about the second carcass. They were busy benghisa-ing the meat. Mazai himself was amongst them. His clothes were covered in fatty grease and gore but his face was beaming. We stopped on the track opposite the melee and Mazai walked down the slope to greet us.

"Haaaiee, Nkosana," he exclaimed happily. *"Thank you for these elephants. My people now have lots of meat to eat."*

"It was my pleasure to feed your people, Mdala," I returned the salutation. *"And the tusks?"*

"The tusks from the first elephant are already back at my kraal," he said affably. *"I will have them cleaned and ready for your collection next time you pass by this way. We have removed the tusks from this one,"* he said waving a hand towards the conglomeration of people behind him. *"I will*

have them carried to my kraal later today."

"Nkosana…" Mbuyotsi spoke to me quietly. *"Shouldn't we take a couple of Mazai's boys with us? If we shoot some more elephants today how will Mazai's people find them in the teak forest? We must take somebody with us who can show them the way."*

So it was, therefore, that we took two of Mazai's young men with us that day. They climbed onto the open back of the Land Rover and they sat down on the flat deck. Ben stood between them, his hand grasping the vehicle's open window frame next to my head. I immediately regretted having picked the men up because the rich stench of the blood and gore that covered their hands and their arms, and their feet, quickly permeated the whole vehicle.

The elephants, I thought, are going smell us a mile away. Mbuyotsi must have had the same notion.

A little further down the track we came to a small pan that still held a bit of muddy water. Mbuyotsi asked me to stop. He instructed the two young men to get into the water and wash their bodies. The stop delayed us about ten minutes but when we resumed our journey there was no longer any cloying stench of blood and guts.

There were elephant tracks everywhere – bulls, and the herd tracks of cows and calves. There was also a fair amount of buffalo spoor. But there was nothing fresh until we had travelled ten more miles along the fence. When we found fresh spoor it came in the form of the tracks of cows and calves.

Ben and Mbuyotsi got out and walked amongst the spoor on the dusty road. Both of them kicked open some of the big elephant turds that lay everywhere around. Both placed the backs of their fingers against the open excrement. They spoke between themselves. Mbuyotsi came round to the driver's side of the vehicle.

"Well?" I asked.

"Skati loh kuku yena kalla," Mbuyotsi informed me. *They were here when the roosters were crowing this morning.* Five o'clock!

I looked at my watch. It read just on ten o'clock. They were five hours ahead of us. The day was still young! But… *"Cows and calves?"* I enquired of Mbuyotsi.

"Cows and calves," he affirmed.

I pursed my lips and pondered. *"Zinghakeh?" How many?*

"Zinghakeh?" Mbuyotsi passed on the question to Ben. He shouted

because Ben was some distance away still examining the spoor.

Ben stopped and looked up. He shrugged his shoulders eloquently. *"Kabanga twenty,"* he replied. *Maybe twenty*.

Twenty cows and calves! Should I tackle them? Was I competent enough to take on twenty elephants in a cowherd all on my own?

Mbuyotsi looked at me enquiringly. He picked up my hesitation. *"You can do it, Nkosana. You can do it. There will only be four or five big ones,"* he said. *"The rest will be tick-in-yaahnies – young ones."*

I mulled over what Mbuyotsi had said. *"And the big ones will be cows,"* he continued encouragingly. *"Cows are much smaller than bulls. They will fall down even if your bullets just sneeze at them."* His encouragement was over-the-top, almost obsequious. I began to feel annoyed.
This was not the Mbuyotsi that I knew.

I smiled hesitantly at the Bushman. He laughed lightly. *"Come Nkosana,"* he said opening the door for me. *"Come. Let's go and shoot us some elephants."*

I looked at the tracker askance. What had got into him this morning? He had never spoken to me like this before. I climbed out of the vehicle.

I looked down at the fresh tracks and put the matter out of my mind. The stirring of adrenaline deep down inside me made me think of hunting elephants.

Mbuyotsi is right, I thought, I *can* handle this breeding herd.

The real purpose of the two tagalong boys now became obvious. No sooner had their feet hit the ground than the trackers foisted their josaks onto them. It was to be the job of Mazai's two young men, today, to carry the heavy water bags. Nevertheless, the trackers had had a point. It would *also* be good to have local people know where the elephants lay dead deep inside the teak forest.

There was a gentle breeze flowing up the Sehumi. When we followed the elephants into the gusu it was moving across our route from right to left. There was nothing wrong with that – unless the jumbos decided to turn to the left when we were deeper inside the sinanga. They didn't.

Tracking an elephant cowherd is very different to tracking bulls. Their movement through the trees is much more leisurely and they are often well spread out. Each mother takes her own offspring this way, then that way, as they seek out particular food plants that they prefer. But all the time they remain a cohesive group.

By twelve o'clock we had closed the gap considerably. Mbuyotsi told me he thought we were then no more than two hours behind them. Although it was Mbuyotsi who did the speaking, I noticed he never spoke to me without first conferring with Ben. What he told me, therefore, was what Ben had told him. Even Mbuyotsi, therefore, was now deferring to Ben as the tracking expert.

The place in the teak forest where we found ourselves at midday was where the elephants had been when we had left the Land Rover on the Sehumi fence line. This interpretation gave me a better perspective about how the hunt was progressing.

Shortly after that, there was a change in the elephants' behavior. They bunched up and moved off resolutely in one direction. They were not running but they had stopped feeding – except for snatching bits of greenery as they walked along. And they were moving, most of them one after the other, almost in single file.

I knew they were then moving off to some place of their ken where they planned to spend the midday hours. This was a good omen. We would catch them when they were standing still and dozing away the hottest period of the day.

I withdrew my ash bag and tested the wind. It had not changed. There was still a gentle breeze blowing from right to left and the elephants were now angling off to the right. It couldn't be better. They were now moving obliquely into the wind.

Ben picked up the new pathway and almost ran along the spoor. I cautioned him to slow down. We had lots of time, I told him. I wanted us to catch the elephants when they were settled. I did not want to find them before they had reached their destination.

It took us another hour to catch up with our quarry. We actually heard them long before we saw them. Besides an irritable cacophony of growls from the mothers, a raucous trumpet or two, and occasional screams from the babies, there was an aura of busy bustling movement. The mothers wanted to rest whilst the young ones wanted to play. There was the sound of big ears wafting and striking flat shoulders. There were the sighing sounds of elephants breathing deeply and releasing their breaths. They had just started to relax.

I again tested the wind. It was steady, blowing from our right front to our left back. It was perfect.

Ben looked at me, waiting for instructions.

"Now we wait," I answered his silent inquiry. *"They haven't settled down enough yet. We'll give them a little more time."*

This was the *'Japan'* effect. It was to become a familiar pattern – finding the elephants before they had settled into their siesta and waiting for them to quiet down. It was to develop into a characteristic of mineand-Ben's elephant hunting technique over the next twenty-three years.

The elephants were perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away and the wind was in our favour. We could not see them. So we hunkered down in a nearby cluster of teak trees. There we sat on the ground, our backs up against the tree trunks, and we passed the josaks round. Everybody had a drink. I restricted everybody to just two mouthfuls of water because I didn't know how long we might still be on the hunt. I was still unsure how this hunt would work out. I was inwardly apprehensive and I made silent gestures indicating that I didn't want anybody to speak. That was a measure of my nervousness.

Within one hour, the previously agitated sounds we had heard were replaced with silence. We could still hear occasional breaths being blown out of trunks. Every now and again, we could hear big ears wafting and flapping against shoulders. There was no sound at all coming from the babies and the younger animals. I visualized the babies all lying down flat on their sides at their mothers' feet.

"Time to go," I advised Ben. *"They're asleep."*

Everybody got up quietly and we prepared ourselves for the final show down.

I checked the 9.3 Mauser. There were four rounds in the magazine, another one up the spout. The safety catch was on. Everything was in order. That would give me five extra shots, quickly, if I needed them. The 9.3 would be adequate for even the biggest cow. I handed the weapon back to Mbuyotsi.

I checked my own weapon. Four cartridges in the magazine, one in the chamber. I quietly clicked the bolt shut and turned the safety key to full-on.

"O.K.," I said at last, looking a little worriedly at my trackers, *"Let's go."*

Mbuyotsi smiled. He well knew what was running through my head. Ben said nothing. He just quietly removed a box of twenty spare .375 rounds from his shirt pocket.

"Ben… when we get up to them" I said, *"You stay here on my right hand side. Mbuyotsi, you stand just behind me."* I then looked into the apprehensive faces of Mazai's two boys. *"And you guys walk behind us. Don't run away and don't interfere with us… O.K.?"* They both nodded their heads, their fright-racked eyes staring hugely all around them. *"You stay right behind us."* They again nodded their heads.

I tested the wind. It had not changed. We set off with me in the lead. I walked silently and directly towards where I could hear the quiet and somnolent sounds of the elephant herd at rest. Inside, my nerves were fluttering.

We were less than fifty yards away when I first saw them. All I could see, to begin with, were the grey-brown backs of the bigger cows. Their ears were wafting imperceptibly. As we drew closer we began to pick up the shapes and sizes of the younger animals, too.

The herd was dozing in a very tight group. The cover was not heavy. There were five big cows, ten or twelve half-grown animals, and several small calves. As I had predicted, I saw two of the babies lying on their sides at their mother's feet. The babies were all sound asleep.

We had approached to within ten paces – *a nice range to start shooting*, I thought – before one of the big cows noticed us. Up went her head. She turned to face us, ears spread out. A soft concerned growl erupted from her throat. The other cows lifted their heads and looked around.

"Tshaya yena," Mbuyotsi instructed me in a hoarse whisper. *"Tshaya loh fust one." Shoot it*, he said, *shoot the first one. "Yena mfaazi makulu."* She is the matriarch.

The tracker was commanding me to act. Mbuyotsi's strange and insistent behaviour today was beginning to rankle.

My bullet smacked the big cow fair-and-square in the middle of her face. She dropped as if pole axed.

The other elephants, startled by the unexpected shot, rushed forward. They moved in different directions out and away from where they had all been standing together. They didn't go far – just four or five paces. Then they stopped and, with heads held high, and with their ears spread wide, they cast their heads from side to side. They were scanning the bush, trying to find out what had caused the disturbance. They all growled noisily. Their young ones gathered close about their mothers' bodies.

"Tshaya… Tshaya…" Mbuyotsi urged. He was getting excited. I was

getting more and more angry.

One after the other the remaining bullets in my rifle found their marks. Just as fast as I could fire, reload, aim and pull the trigger I knocked all five of the biggest animals to the ground.

I made a move to take the 9.3 off Mbuyotsi. *"Uhh Uhh…"* he urged, shaking his head. My temper began to boil. He made a facial gesture toward Ben who was standing right next to me, offering two rounds in his right hand.

I did not have time to argue.

I grabbed at the two cartridges and stuffed them into the magazine. I rammed the next two on top, slamming the bolt shut.

"Tshaya. Tshaya," Mbuyotsi urged. *"Yena azhi baleka." Shoot quickly they are going to run away.*

"Damn you," I said under my breath. For a brief moment I looked at Mbuyotsi angrily. I turned my attention back to the elephants.

In next to no time there were another four elephants on the ground. I reloaded.

"Bwiya!" Mbuyotsi instructed. *Come!* He didn't wait for me to comply. He ran ahead towards where the still living elephants were all milling around the bodies of the dead ones. The tracker stopped just five paces from the nearest group.

"Tshaya," he instructed. *"Tshaya… Tshaya… Tshaya…"*

I shot as fast as I was able selecting the biggest of the young elephants still standing that I could see. At every shot my targeted animal fell to the ground. Very soon there were just three babies left.

"Don't stop now," Mbuyotsi urged me. *"Keep shooting until the last one is dead."*

Despite my chagrin, I knew that what Mbuyotsi was saying was good advice. I was getting no pleasure out of killing the babies but I knew it had to be done. Switching off to what I was doing, and just getting on with the job, is exactly what I needed to do.

Ben stood at my side. He was bent over pulling cartridges out from my belt now, to fill the gaps we had made in the box in his hands.

Then, suddenly, it was all over. Every elephant in the group was down. The whole fracas had lasted perhaps just one minute. I was bemused. I was sad. I was exhilarated. It had been exciting stuff. I knew I had done a good job. I had done exactly what I had to do, but it had not been a pleasant task.

My cheek ached from the repetitive upward punching of the wooden stock. My shoulder was sore from the multiple heavy recoils of the rifle's butt. My blood was up. My spirits were soaring. Whatever danger there might have been tackling the cowherd on my own, it was now behind me. The hunt was over.

We walked amongst the carcasses checking to see if any animals were still alive. Two of the big cows were conscious. One was struggling to get up. I put a bullet into her brain at point blank range. The other one was watching me and breathing hard through her trunk. I put her out of her misery. Four of the younger animals needed the same treatment. Then it was truly all over.

The two Ndebele youths walked forward cautiously. Their eyes were wide. Their mouths, shielded by the spread fingers of one hand, stood open in awe. They uttered not a sound. They looked around from dead elephant to dead elephant with unbelieving eyes. Their astonishment was absolute.

"Nineteen," Ben came over and told me quietly. *"We got nineteen."* There was a quiet but triumphant smile on his face. The trackers loved taking handfuls of tails back home. It was the evidence they needed to impress their peers.

One of the young men approached Mbuyotsi and spoke to him in Sindebele. His eyes looked me over apprehensively. The Bushman laughed. The two of them walked over to me. Mbuyotsi gently took the rifle out of my hands. He checked the safety catch. *"This young man says he would like to feel your rifle,"* Mbuyotsi said with a mischievous grin.

"Take it," he told the young man holding the weapon out to him. I could understand the language very clearly. *"You can have the privilege of holding the gun with so much power."*

Mbuyotsi's evil mind was working overtime. I could see it but didn't understand what he had in mind. Holding the weapon by the pistol grip he held it out to the mfaan (young man) who took hold of it by the barrel.

There was an immediate, muted, sizzling sound. The youth let the barrel go and cursed loudly. Mbuyotsi laughed. The young man danced about holding his burnt hand, with his other hand about the wrist.

"Maaiiwey…" he lamented. *"Maaaiiwey…"* Mbuyotsi just stood there laughing.

Even the best of the Bushmen had an evil streak! I had not seen Mbuyotsi like this before. His mood all morning had been very strange. He must be full of dagga (marijuana) I surmised. The Bushmen often were. Theirs was a life

of wine, women and song – and whatever else brought them pleasure. Dagga was one of their weaknesses.

I took the rifle back from Mbuyotsi and gingerly tapped my fingers on the barrel. It was red hot. It should have been. I had just fired twentyfive rounds through it in rapid succession.

"Haaieee… Mbuyotsi!" I remonstrated, shaking my head. *"That was not funny."*

I turned to the youth and, in Sindebele, said to him: *"Come over here. Let me see your hand."* The young man came over to me and gingerly held out his hand, palm upwards. There was a white sear-mark right across the palm and along some of the fingers. He had been really badly burned – although it probably looked worse than it really was! The wellworked hand-skin of Africa's rural black people is akin to toughened leather.

I poured water from one of the josaks over the burn marks to cool them down. There was not much else I could do. *"That was not funny,"* I said to Mbuyotsi again. *"Don't you ever do that again."*

Mbuyotsi sliced open the belly skin of one of the big cows with his penknife and he removed a thick chunk of fat. He made what he did look so simple. I was amazed. He put the fat into the young man's injured hand and told him to hold it tight.

"I think, for your troubles," I said to Mbuyotsi angrily, *"you can carry the josak this mfaan was carrying. You can carry it all the way back to the Land Rover."* The Bushman's crinkled face smiled sadly. His eyes were full of what I could see was genuine remorse. This puzzled me. He nodded his head. He would carry the one josak.

We cut off the tails and counted the tusks. If Mazai's people were to have this meat as well, then *he* would have to be responsible for collecting the ivory. And we counted the sexes of the animals' killed. All that information would have to be recorded on the Main Camp elephant-kill register.

We set off through the teak forest in what I considered to be the direction of the Sehumi drainage. I started off in front. I surmised that if we just followed the falling afternoon sun we would cut the fence line sooner or later. It was *'somewhere'* due west of our position. Ben and Mbuyotsi, however, thought otherwise.

"Tshaya beekie right hand," Mbuyotsi advised me. *Turn a little more to the right!* They clearly had a better appreciation of the direction we had to go.

How they were able to so finitely define directions in the middle of a teak forest, where every tree looked exactly the same as the next one, I never found out. Yet, within a year, I had developed the same capability without ever knowing how I did it. I yielded the lead to the trackers.

Both the Ndebele boys dragged a heavy stick behind them – leaving two deep scars in the soft sand along our route. These ground scars would, tomorrow, enable people with no tracking skills – even the women and children – to find their way to the pile of carcasses.

The young man with the burnt hand seemed to have made a remarkable recovery.

* * *

That afternoon, on the way back to Makololo, Mbuyotsi sat beside me in the Land Rover. He held both the rifles upright between his knees, one in each hand. Ben, as usual, stood on the back of the Land Rover.

I took advantage of the fact that I had Mbuyotsi to myself for a while. I challenged him about the dictatorial manner that he had interacted with me during the day's hunt. I had been more than a little irked, especially when he had persistently told me to *"shoot… shoot… shoot…"* It had put a blemish on the whole day's hunting experience.

At first I thought he had been bragging in front of the two young Ndebele men. Alternatively, I believed he must be full of dagga. Not so, on both counts!

Mbuyotsi dropped his head and looked ashamed. He was very unhappy that he had offended me and he was clearly contrite. The explanation he offered me, however, salved my wounds and it reinforced what I had always suspected. Malindela was keeping a watchful eye on me from a distance and he was doing that through the Bushman trackers.

Just before we all left Main Camp on the road-making exercise, Bruce had quietly and privately called Mbuyotsi into his office. There he had instructed the Bushman to look after me but without any mollycoddling. Bruce had been told there were lots of elephant cows and calves on the Tjolotjo side of the fence and he wanted them removed. He told the tracker that I was to be encouraged to tackle them. Mbuyotsi told me that Malindela had said he believed I could handle the breeding herds but he thought I might avoid making contact with them when I was hunting alone.

How well my big-boss-man understood me! He was quietly pushing me into advanced hunting situations from a great distance off. I knew he was

concerned about me, too. I also read *that* into what Mbuyotsi told me. And I realized, then that that was why the tracker was reluctant to give me the 9.3 Mauser during the hunt. He was holding it in reserve for an emergency.

If I had been in Bruce's boots, I realized, I would have done much the same thing. He clearly felt responsible for the brash twenty-one year old cadet game ranger, complete with sparkling blue eyes and big bushy tail, who had been so peremptorily thrust upon him last October. At the same time, he realized my potential and he wanted me to develop quickly to my full capacity. Knowledge of all this induced within me a great feeling of humility. To be considered with such regard by a man of such stature – the Great Malindela – was praise beyond belief.

Bruce, of course, had not counted on Mbuyotsi opening up to me like this. What he had told the tracker was all supposed to be kept under wraps.

Bruce had also instructed Mbuyotsi to keep me shooting once the shooting had started. *Keep him shooting when his blood is up*, he had told the tracker. He did not want me bringing baby elephants back to Main Camp because I didn't have the heart to shoot them in the field. He probably had my wildebeest, Koni, in mind when he said that! And *that*, Bruce understood, was probably my greatest potential weakness. He was right.

That night I lay in my camp bed and I mulled over the slaughter of the breeding herd. I knew it had to be done but it did not sit well on my disturbed soul. It was something I was going to have to get used to, however, because I knew there was a lot more of the same to come.

I suddenly realized something else. This was the first time that any of the Bushmen had ever opened up to me and broken their unspoken pledge of confidentiality with Malindela. That could only mean they were beginning to trust me – to become one with me. It left a warm glow in the pit of my stomach – equal, at least, to the feeling of contentment I experienced when I had listened to what Mbuyotsi had to tell me about Malindela's instructions.

Just before I dropped off to sleep, I remembered how Mbuyotsi had enticed the young Ndebele man to grab hold of the weapon's muzzle, and how the searing hot barrel had burnt the man's hand. It had not been very funny for the victim but it had taught me a valuable lesson. I was to relearn that lesson the hard way – many times. You don't touch the roasting barrel of your rifle after you have just shot out a whole herd of elephants.

I smiled to myself. The incident *had* been very funny – in a way. My clouded memory of it began to fade. I was already half asleep. Finally, I

forgave Mbuyotsi for everything. What else could I do? I turned sideways in the bed, settled my head on the pillow, and pulled the blanket up to my neck. The next moment I disappeared into the land of the sandman. * * *

The day after the elephant cowherd hunt the boys cut their way through the five miles of teak forest to Hwecau Pan. Beyond Hwecau we entered the flat mopani woodland with its hard clay-soil. Albeit another seven miles in distance, we were able to complete a good and easy track between Hwecau and Tum-Tum in just one day. The clay was not wet enough to be a problem for the vehicles and the trees were all of moderate size. The bigger trees were also few and far between. Most of the work involved cutting out saplings and scrub.

Tum-Tum was twelve miles from Makololo and, as there was good natural water in the pan, we relocated our base camp to Tum-Tum. And we spent the next three days improving the Tum-Tum to Hwecau track.

I could then not do both jobs at the same time. I could not hunt elephants on the Sehumi and supervise the cutting of the new road to and beyond Tum-Tum.

My shoulder and cheek were tenderly bruised from firing twenty-six rounds in rapid succession. They needed a rest. My government issue Cogswell and Harrison rifle did not fit me well. I was being punished for using it. I had good reason, therefore, to lay off the elephant hunting for a few days. I focused my attention on the new road.

Mopani tree trunks are very dry. Instead of stumping out the roots of the mopanis – as we had had to do with the teak – therefore, the boys dug pits around the bigger trees and they set bonfires alight inside the holes. The fires burnt through the root systems in one night. The next morning the still smouldering fires were extinguished and the fallen tree trunks were dragged away from the new roadway. The pits were then refilled with the excavated soil.

There was little grass growing in the mopani veld so there was no chance of a wild fire getting away from us. The burning of the roots expedited our progress. Within three days of us moving our base camp, the entire track from Makololo to Tum-Tum was cleared and stumped, and ready for the mechanical grader.

Beyond Tum-Tum we moved back into teak forest. This time the teak trees were few and spaced well apart, and there was no sinanga undergrowth. Our biggest problem was cutting out the teak saplings and digging down into

the sand to remove the tangled roots. There was often more wood to remove underground than there was wood above ground. The going was slow and methodical. There was not really much that I could do to speed-up the process. The boys all knew what they had to do and, under Munene's and Mbuyotsi's tight supervision, they all did their work very well.

We had progressed about four miles beyond Tum-Tum, and were deep into the sparse teak forest, when a sequence of events happened that led me into a strange and potentially very dangerous situation.

I was sitting in my Land Rover *'at the point'* – that is, where all the work was being done – when I saw two big giraffe bulls fighting. They were standing shoulder to shoulder, swinging their heads like huge gyrating bludgeons, smacking their stumpy horns into each others' opposing necks. They were a long way off and directly to our front – far too far away for me to hear the heavy impacts of their almighty and aggressive collisions.

I got out of the Land Rover, stretched my legs, and balancing my chin on the top of the door, I watched the contest in silence. All around me was the sound of the boys chopping away at the roots of the trees, and of their shovels digging down into the sand to expose the tangles beneath.

I was bored. I looked at my watch. It was nearly midday. This was the stretch of teak forest we had traversed, heading south, when we were on horseback just six weeks before. I remembered that Mbuyotsi had had trouble finding the top end of the drainage line that fed down to the pan where we had captured the ducks. We were headed for that same pan now – cutting a road along the self-same route we had taken on horseback that day. The pan we had camped at that night was earmarked for a new borehole. It was to become an all-year-round game water supply in the not too distant future.

I looked at the giraffe with renewed interest. They were standing in a shallow depression which I thought looked much like the one we had turned into, changing direction to the west, on the day of our horse patrol. It was important that we find and follow that depression on this occasion because that is where the new road had to go.

So as not to lose the location on our return visit – which was now – Mbuyotsi had that day slashed the trunk of a big teak tree with a special mark. That mark indicated the exact point where we had to turn west into the correct drainage line. We had not yet reached that point. The boys were still following the occasional slash marks on the tree trunks that marked our journey south.

I decided to walk towards the giraffe. I had nothing else to do so I thought it might be quite nice to sit for a while and to watch the contest at close quarters. I wandered off ahead of the road-cutting gang. In my head, I had a vision of the teak tree with its special marking. I hoped to find it somewhere near where the giraffe were fighting.

As I walked along the sounds of the boys chopping wood receded behind me. I had left my rifle in the vehicle so I was unencumbered as I strolled leisurely through the open forest. It was midday. The bush was silent. Even the birds were enjoying a snooze amidst the higher branches.

Very soon the sounds of heavy buffeting came to me from the giraffe. They were really smacking their stubby horns into each other. Neither was prepared to give an inch. I got to within about a hundred yards of the two fighters and I sat down to watch them at their jousting. I stayed with them for half-an-hour then decided it was time for me to return to the Land Rover. There was no sign of the big teak tree with Mbuyotsi's special slash marks.

I wandered back in the direction from which I had come – listening for the sounds of the boys chopping wood. There were no sounds. The forest was completely silent. I began to get worried. I guessed that I had travelled back through the trees the same distance that I had travelled from my Land Rover to get to the giraffe. I looked back towards where the giraffe had been fighting. There was now no sign nor sound of them.

I suddenly realized I was standing all alone in pristine teak forest. I was in the middle of nowhere and I hadn't a clue where to find my Land Rover. I was also unarmed and seemingly lost in the country's biggest and wildest game reserve. A mild panic set in.

Where were the boys? Why didn't I pick up the sounds of their axes cutting wood? The sounds of their chopping normally carried far-andwide in the otherwise silent forest.

I looked around at the teak trees that surrounded me. They all looked the same. None looked any different from any of the others. They were all part of a huge wilderness that had no directions. There were no slash marks on any of the tree trunks to guide me.

Why couldn't I hear the boys chopping with their axes? That fact worried me. I must be within hearing distance of the boys chopping wood! But I wasn't. That could mean only one thing. I wasn't where I thought I was. I could not, therefore, have walked back from the giraffe in the direction of my Land Rover. I must have wandered off at a tangent. I looked down to my feet.

There were my footprints in the soft Kalahari sand. Those tracks were all I had to take me back to my Tum-Tum camp. I could back-track my route from this point. That would take me back to where I had been watching the giraffe, and from that point I could follow my earlier spoor back to the Land Rover. It was the logical thing to do. I didn't do it! Why? I don't know. I was panicking.

Nevertheless, I pondered the possibilities. I couldn't have wandered *that far* off course. The distance from my Land Rover to the giraffe had only been about one mile. I had walked back from the giraffe towards where I *thought* my Land Rover was – for *about* one mile. I must, therefore, be *somewhere* near my Land Rover. Surely my direction finding in teak forest was not *that* bad?

I raised my head and howled loudly like a spotted hyena. *That* sound carries great distances in the African bush. It was one of the communicating calls the Bushmen used all the time. I stood still and I listened. Not a sound. The forest was silent.

I howled again – with the same result. If I was anywhere within reasonable distance of the road gang they would have heard me. There were twenty boys in the road gang. Surely one of them must hear me? Nothing! Not a squeak.

My body began to tingle. It was the first sign of real panic setting in. My mind was starting to freeze up. I had no idea, at that point, just how I was going to get out of my potentially very dangerous predicament.

I re-thought my situation – again – carefully and as calmly as I was able. I could not understand why I could not hear the boys chopping. I couldn't understand why nobody had heard my loud and far-reaching hyena call.

The new road was being cut in a straight line that was pointed directly towards where the giraffe had been fighting. That meant I must have walked back directly towards the 'point' of the road – and deviated slightly, either to the left or to the right, of that now very well defined track. I also decided it was probable that I had moved well past the point of the new road. Why else did the boys not hear my hyena call?

If either of these possibilities was correct, I had two options. If I had walked past the point of the track on its left hand side, all I had to do was to turn to the right and I would walk onto the cut line. On the other hand, if I had walked past the point on its right hand side, I would have to move to the left to reach the cut line. I had to make up my mind. On which side of the

track was I located?

If I was on the right hand side of the track and I moved, in error, to the right I would be walking away from the track towards the distant Sehumi. If, on the other hand, I was on the left hand side of the track and I moved, in error, to my left, I had a long, long haul to the Linkwasha drainage.

Mentally I spun a coin. I turned to the left. After half an hour I realized I had made the wrong decision. I also knew that I was then truly and hopelessly lost. I was now in *real* trouble. I stood for a while in that forlorn teak forest and I called, and I called, like a spotted hyena. I got no response.

What to do now? I *had* to do *something*. One of my biggest problems was that I had no plan of action. I sat down and quietly thought about what I should do. At first there seemed to be no options.

One thing I did know – from continuously pouring over the maps of Hwange – was that Tum-Tum Pan was sixteen miles away, and *exactly* due east, of Madundumela Pan (also known as Linkwasha borehole No. Two). Madundumela was at the southern end of the long, wide and welldefined Linkwasha vlei – one of the flatter *fossil rivers* that ran in a north to south direction. If I walked in a westerly direction I *knew* that I was bound to hit the Linkwasha vlei. I also knew – from Mbuyotsi's tuition – that there would be elephant paths radiating out from Madundumela Pan for five miles in every direction. All it required for me to find Madundumela Pan, therefore, was for me to get onto to one of those elephant paths and to follow it onto the pan.

I settled on a plan of action. I *had* to have a plan of action. I would walk to Madundumela and stay the night at the pan. In the morning, I would walk directly into the rising sun. After walking for about twelve miles in the morning – about four hours, I reasoned – I was bound to find one of the radiating elephant paths that ran out from Tum-Tum. Alternatively, I would hit the new north-south running track *'somewhere'*. My reasoning was sound. I knew I could do this. My first hurdle was to walk the sixteen miles through the teak forest, in a westerly direction, before the sun had set. My target became Madundumela pan.

Which way was west? It was midday. The sun was directly overhead. I broke off a straight dead stick and stuck it vertically into the ground. Its shadow puddled in a dark pool around its base. I waited.

One minute dragged into two, then four, then ten. Gradually the pool of shade began to edge itself away from the stick. The sun was descending into the west. The shadow, therefore, pointed to the east. I made a bold arrow

mark towards the west.

I could not afford to waste any more time. I had sixteen miles of teak forest to traverse before sunset.

I stood up and I gave a last, long and mournful hyena bellow. I made it sound like a hyena in distress. It reflected my own distress. I listened. There was no response. I set off in a westerly direction determined to make Madundumela before dark.

My route, moving from east to west, followed diagonally across a long, wide fossil sand dune on the crest of which grew a continuous swathe of teak forest. Some of it was sparse. Some of it was clothed in big trees. In some places the sinanga was extraordinarily dense. I soldiered on moving as fast as I was able.

An hour after I set off, I stopped and placed another stick in the sand to make sure I was moving in the right direction. After that the slowly descending sun guided me towards the west.

I saw practically no game. Every now and again a small grey duiker erupted at my feet and ran speeding-off into the undergrowth. I trudged on. The sand was loose and soft. It was hard going. I passed a small herd of eland that stood still and watched me walking through the trees.

There were no major game trails anywhere. The forest I was passing through was in no-man's-land. I was clearly very far from water. After passing the eland, I saw no game. There were few tracks.

In the late afternoon I came across more and more elephant sign. There were also the tracks of kudu, sable, wildebeest and zebra. There were now many small game trails running through the forest, all heading west. These, I surmised, were the outriders of what would ultimately become major elephant paths. All roads lead to Rome!

I picked up fresh lion spoor and last night's tracks of a single hyena. This was a worry. I began to wonder what I was going to do come nightfall if I did not make Madundumela. There was a corrugated iron pump house at the pan. It would provide me with a safe haven against lions. But, if I did not make the pan I would be forced to spend the night in the branches of a tree. That thought did not inspire me.

I moved on resolutely. I could not think of failure.

Then I hit a major elephant path. It was well used and it angled in the general direction that I was going. This, surely, was a major route to Madundumela?

I stuck to it. It was well trodden and hard underfoot. This enabled me to walk faster.

Just before the sun dropped below the tall treeline I heard elephants off to my right. They were moving quickly across my right front. I walked parallel to them for a while, letting our paths converge. Then I had them in sight. It was a breeding herd of about fifteen animals. They were hustling along another path that eventually joined the one I was walking on. I tagged on behind them. They were travelling fast and impatiently. They were headed for water. And the only water anywhere about in this region of the park was Madundumela.

I began to feel more confident. My plan seemed to be working.

I stopped walking long enough to pick up a handful of Kalahari sand. I let it pour down through my fingers and watched the smaller particles wafting off to one side in the almost still evening breeze. There was practically no wind – just a drift of air from my right to my left. The movement was almost imperceptible but I needed the information those drifting sand particles gave to me. I *had* to know which way the wind was blowing. Now I knew.

I also knew that if I stuck behind the elephants they would not detect my presence. And so long as I stuck *close* behind them I would be safe from any lions or hyenas that might be wandering about. I was very conscious of the fact that there might be predators waiting near the water. In the evenings, and at night, lions and hyenas were always on the lookout for easy pickings when their prey animals came down to drink. I had no intention of being an easy picking.

As the sun was setting the elephant path dropped down into a shallow depression. It was the bottom end of the Linkwasha drainage – but I did not know that then! The vegetation changed. Instead of teak trees now, there were camel thorns and *mtechanis*. All this told me we were getting near to water.

The elephants rushed through a small pan – just a puddle – that still had some water in it. I was tempted to stop and have a drink for I was by then parched, but what little water there was had been thoroughly churned up by the elephant's shuffling feet. The fluid was then just liquid mud. There was nothing for me to drink.

There were, however, two hand-sized terrapins floundering about on the surface. I caught them both and, with one in each hand, I hurried to catch up with my elephants. The small water-tortoises stank like nothing on earth but

they were edible. I was going to have to eat *something* if I was to survive the ordeal that lay ahead.

I was still thinking about how I was going eat those terrapins, when the bush opened up and we – the elephants and I together – emerged onto the open ground that surrounded Madundumela Pan.

I hurriedly looked around. There was no sign of lions.

The pan was half-full of muddy water over which a green algae scum had spread. Off to one side there was the corrugated iron hut that protected the diesel engine and the pump. It was to be my salvation in the coming night.

The elephants, still unconscious of my presence, hurried over to the pan. They waded into the muddy mixture and began drawing the tips of their trunks across its watery surface, from left to right and right to left. They sucked up the few inches of clear water that lay on top of the deep muddy sludge below, and they squirted it into their mouths. The suckling sounds of their noisy drinking, and the grumbling growls from their throats, washed over the whole pan area as they slaked their thirst.

I went straight to the pump house. My immediate concern was that the pump boys might have locked the door when they had returned to Main Camp last November. The pumps had been silent over the last five months. Nobody had been in attendance at Madundumela in all that time. It was with some relief that I discovered the hasp-and-staple lock on the steel-framed door, had been secured with just a twist of soft baling wire.

I opened the door and looked inside. The pump was in place. The diesel engine was attached. I could see that Harry had already serviced this unit for there was no loose oil emblazoned across its surface. Everything was clean and crisp, and ready for the coming dry season. Even the veebelts connecting the pump to the engine were new and unused. Everything reeked of oil and diesel.

Hanging from two stretched wires under the roof were the dry remnants of a buffalo’s lungs that the pump boys had cut into strips six months before. Meat was meat and they were not about to let *anything* go to waste. They had clearly forgotten the dried lungs, or they had abandoned it when they went home in November.

There was an empty five-gallon oilcan standing against one wall. It was clean as a whistle. The pump attendants had obviously used it to fetch water from the trough, and to store water in the pump house for their domestic needs. Thinking about the two pump boys then, I did not envy them. From

the end of the month – in just a few short weeks of time – they would be here again for the next six months. They would be far from home, all alone, keeping the pumps working day and night. They would live under a tarpaulin outside the pump house but, at night, they would never be far from its open door. Like the pump house was going to be for me that night, it was their last haven of safety should lions be on the prowl. And they would, of course, always have a big fire burning outside throughout the hours of darkness.

I dropped my two terrapins into the can and went outside. A feeling of great relief spread over me. I smiled at the red sky in the west.

I had made it. I had been dead on target. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of great accomplishment. Step one of my plan had been accomplished.

Looking at the elephants wallowing in the muddy water, it was clear that I would not get very much drinking water from the pan. Even the elephants were having trouble scooping clear water from the muddy surface. And they were, all the time, churning it all up more and more into a chocolate pudding.

I went back into the pump house and started the engine. The motor chug-chug-chugged into life. Water began to gush, in spasms, into the shallow circular cement trough that was set into the ground between the pump and the pan. When the trough was full it would spill over and flow down a shallow channel into the pan.

At first the elephants were alarmed by the starting-up of the engine. When the machinery settled down to its regular purring rhythm, however, they recognized the noise as something that was familiar. This was the sound that brought them water from May to November every year.

All the big cows emerged from the pan and they gathered round the trough. They took it in turns to press the tips of their trunks against the outflow pipe and they sucked in the clean fresh water with relish. Soon the whole clan was gathered around the trough enjoying the fresh clean water.

I had other things on my mind. I needed a fire to cook my terrapins. I gathered together some dry wood including two very dry and very straight sticks. I made-up a pile of tinder-dry elephant dung which I intended to ignite. That would be the beginning of my campfire.

Nearby there was a pile of firewood that the pump attendants had collected six months before. I gauged that I probably had enough firewood to keep a moderate fire going all night long.

With a bit of loose wire twisted off the hut wall, I dug out a *‘pit’* in the

side of one of my straight wooden sticks. I then worked the end of another straight stick against the rough cement of the pump house floor, and I fashioned it into a point.

Just as I had seen the Bushmen do many times before – and as I had done myself on several previous experiments – I placed the stick with the pit in its side under my toes (still inside their veldschoen boots). I arranged it so that the pit faced upwards. I then placed the sharp end of the other stick into the pit and I spread some dry elephant dung directly in front of them both.

I then twisted the sharp-ended stick repeatedly and rapidly, one way and then the other, between the palms of my hands – all the while exerting a strong downward pressure. The trick to getting a fire going using this Bushman technique is to generate great friction between the two tinder-dry wooden surfaces.

When I had done this before, under my trackers' supervision, a small pile of smouldering black wood powder spilled onto the tinder dry elephant dung. This made the dung smoulder. Once the elephant dung is smoking, the making of a fire is then a very simple matter. A few gentle breaths would set the glowing dung aflame.

I tried and I tried – so diligently did I try – to get the process to work. I used all the right techniques. Everything was perfectly done. But no smouldering black wood powder was generated. After half-an-hour I was exhausted. I then knew I was not going to get a fire going that night. I concluded the sticks I was using were just a little too damp. I abandoned the attempt.

The sun set. Darkness pervaded the land. The elephants disappeared into the night. There was, however, a bright moon riding high in the sky. I looked around the pan to see if there were any lions lurking around. Satisfied that I was alone I took my two terrapins to the pan and released them into the mucky water. I had a long drink of water from the outflow in the trough and I brought a bucketful back with me to the pump house.

I then sat on the cement floor with my legs outside the open doorway and I listened to the sounds of the night. Then the mosquitoes started to hum. They came at me in their droves.

My tummy began to rumble. I tried to ignore it. The terrapins were now gone so I had nothing to eat. They stank so much anyway I doubted I would have been able to eat them. But, deep down, I knew I would have. The flames of a fire would have scorched off the pervading stink and the hot coals would

have cooked the tasteless white flesh. That night I would have eaten anything.

I slapped at the mosquitoes. They attacked me in squadrons. I soon realized I was not going to get much sleep that night. I went outside and opened one of the diesel drums. I poured diesel onto my hands and I smeared the fuel all over the exposed parts of my body. This worked after a fashion. But the mossies still got to me, through the material of my short trousers and through my thin cotton shirt.

Inside the hut it was dark. It was marginally better sitting in the doorway because the moon gave me some light. My tummy rumbled continuously. I thought about the strips of dried buffalo lung hanging from the wires inside the hut. Were they edible? I got up and pulled them off the wire.

Sitting back in the doorway, I tasted the dried lung with very long teeth. I tried to eat a piece. It tasted of nothing at all. It was worse than very bad biltong. It dissolved in my mouth like stringy, coarse tissue paper. I *'slucked'* a mouthful of the chewed dried lung down my throat, washing it down with handfuls of water. I ate another piece. I washed that down, too. Within five minutes it was all gone. I did not enjoy the meal but it filled a hole in my tummy. It was all I had had to eat that day except a very light breakfast in the dawn.

A little later, I was sitting in the doorway of the hut when a large silvery shape came loping towards me out of the darkness. I froze. It was a lion. It had seen me and it continued to jog in my direction. I got up, hurried inside, and slammed the metal door shut. I looked out through the doorjamb gaps. The lion was a scruffy male nomad. It walked about outside the hut investigating everything I had touched.

I silently pushed my hand down the side of the door and found the bolt handle. I secured the door.

I switched the pump off to better hear what was going on outside.

There were two lions outside – then three. I could see them clearly in the moonlight. They prowled around. They sniffed at the metal walls of the hut and at the door. I was conscious that only a miniscule thickness of corrugated iron separated me from the nearest lion. I banged on the wall with my fist. The lions, startled, jumped back from the pump house. They stood still for a long moment looking at the hut. Then they departed into the night. That was the last I saw of them but they roared, intermittently, all around the pan all night long.

I got no sleep that night. What with the lions roaring, the mosquitoes eating me up, my tummy rumbling in protest at the lungs I had ingested, the stench of diesel, and the hardness of the oily and very cold cement floor under my bum, there was no incentive for me to sleep.

I was weary and tired when the ground hornbills – far away in the distance – announced the coming of the dawn.

I opened the door and ventured out into the cool dawn light. I was cold and sore, and stiff, after a terrible night inside the hut. And I stank of diesel.

Red-billed francolins were chattering loudly in the gulley that separated the pan from the edge of the nearby teak forest.

About an hour before, the lions had been roaring to the east of the pan – from a place somewhere along the route that I needed to take to get back to Tum-Tum.

I stood still. I waited. I listened. I needed some sound of betrayal that would tell me where the lions were at that moment. The last thing I wanted to do was to walk into them at the start of my long return trip to Tum-Tum.

The minutes ticked. Half an hour went by. The sun was just creeping over the eastern horizon when I heard the mewing call of a young lion. It was not far off but, if they were together, it seemed they had moved northwards. An answering call came from another lion a little further west. They were on the move. They were travelling to the north and west of the pan.

I set off, immediately, walking towards the rising sun. I moved as fast as I was able along a well-used elephant path that was pointed in the right direction. I wanted to clear the environs of the pan quickly – to get away from the busy game trails – because if trouble was to come that is where I would find it. I was an hour out from Madundumela before I started to breathe easy.

Then the slog began. It was a repetition of what I had experienced, *en route* to Madundumela, the previous day. When I had returned to noman's land the game trails petered out. The sand was then soft underfoot and my fast walking pace was exhausting. It was easier returning to TumTum, however, because the rising sun was a blazing beacon. My plan was exactly the same as the day before. My target was a ten-mile wide strip of bush with, I hoped, elephant paths that radiated out from the Pan. To find Tum-Tum all I had to do was to find one of those paths and to follow it into my home base.

Tum-Tum, however, was not a permanent pan. It normally did not have

water for six months of the year. So I wasn't sure just how obvious the elephant paths about it would be. But there was also the new track we had been cutting. Surely I could not miss *that* – again?

I calculated a time schedule. Tum-Tum was sixteen miles due east of Madundumela! It would take me five hours to cover that distance. I had left Madundumela just after 5.30 a.m. That meant I would reach TumTum sometime between ten and eleven o'clock. And that is exactly what happened – or nearly so.

Sometime around ten o'clock, way in the faraway distance, I heard the melancholy notes of a hyena call. The Bushmen were out looking for me!

I stood my ground and replied.

There was an immediate response. I replied again. I began running in the direction of the call. I knew then the trackers were following my spoor of yesterday. They were trying to discover where I had gone.

Within fifteen minutes, and after many to-and-fro hyena call messages, I saw a tall, lean figure in khaki running in my direction. He had not seen me so I gave another loud call to alert him. The figure stopped, turned, saw me and came running towards me.

It was Kitso, the tracker who always led the second pack mule, Brandy, on our horse patrols. This was the Bushman who, at Tchakabika Hot Springs last November, had jumped in front of a charging lion that was trying to kill one of the pack donkeys. He had been armed then only with a penknife and a little stick, but he had saved the donkey and he had chased the lion away.

Kitso came running up to me and, in full charge he fell at my feet and grabbed me round my legs. *"Nkosana… Nkosana…"* he kept saying.
I bent over and touched his head.

"I'm O.K.," I said to him quietly. *"It's all right. I'm O.K., Kitso."*

He turned his head up towards me. Tears were running down his face in two huge streams. *"Haaaiieee…"* he exclaimed. *"We thought you were dead. We thought a lion had killed you."*

"No it didn't," I said the obvious to him. *"A lion didn't kill me. I'm O.K."*

"Haaaaiieeee… Nkosana…"

"Come Kitso," I said. *"Get up now…"* I helped him to his feet.
"How far is it to Tum-Tum?"

"About an hour…"

"Well then. Come… Let's go."

Along the way we gathered in other trackers including both Ben and Mbuyotsi. They had found and been following my tracks.

Harry Cantle and the Member-in-charge of the Dett Police Station, Sergeant Jack Parker, were already at Tum-Tum when we arrived. They were setting up radio communications for a helicopter to come and look for me. There was an Air Force helicopter standing-by at the Native Commissioner's Office in Tjolotjo. It was ready to come at a moment's notice. All it was waiting for was a radio signal from Jack.

I had never seen a helicopter before. I didn't even know the Royal Rhodesian Air Force had been equipped with helicopters.

By the time I walked into camp at Tum-Tum, I had a herd of happy natives all surrounding me. On reaching camp, I saw a grey police Land Rover standing next to a tall mopani tree. There was a native constable in the upper branches. He was trying to secure a sputnik aerial that was sticking out from the topmost branches. Jack was half way up the tree carefully feeding a pair of aerial wires up the trunk. Harry was lower down feeding the bottom parts of the wires up to Jack. None of them had seen me walk into camp.

I walked under the tree and looked up at the *monkeys* in its branches. I stood still – saying nothing – waiting for Harry to look down. When he did look down I saw him take a deep breath – and there was a sudden look of relief on his face. It changed instantly, however, to one of mischief. He then held a finger over his lips and he *shussshed* at me quietly.

Then he said softly: *"Go and get lost again… I want a ride in the helicopter."*

* * *

All's well that ends well.

The whole incident was very easily explained. The day before, whilst I had been away looking at the fighting giraffe, the whole gang of labourers had downed tools, climbed onto the Bedford lorry and Munene had driven them back to Tum-Tum. My trackers went with them. It was lunchtime and the camp cook, who had prepared a cooked meal for them all, had indicated they should be back in camp by one o'clock *'shaap'*.

Nobody had given one iota of thought to me and my need for lunch, too – or about my whereabouts. Everybody, I suppose, had considered that I was big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. My Land Rover was

standing where I had parked it, under a big *mchibi* tree next to the new track, and they had all concluded that I knew how to get back to it. Getting their own lunch was, at that time, all that everybody had been thinking about.

On coming back to where I knew the end of the new road to be, I had expected to hear the boys chopping wood. When I did not hear that familiar sound, I became confused. It made me believe that I was way off beam. In fact, when I first stopped to get my bearings, I was no further than a hundred yards from my Land Rover – which I could not see because it was hidden by a coppice of bushes. I gave no thought to the fact that the boys might have gone back to Tum-Tum for lunch – yet I had known that was their plan.

I had panicked. Not wildly… but I *had* panicked.

I had done all the wrong things. In retrospect, my decision to walk the sixteen miles to Madundumela Pan was bizarre. My rationale was sound enough – and the plan had worked – but there were other, much better, alternatives. Just back-tracking my own spoor would have been a much better option. My state of suppressed panic, however, had intervened.

After I had been absent for several hours Munene had begun to get worried. He asked the trackers to find me and make sure I was all right. By then, of course, I was already *en route* to Madundumela. The trackers raised the alarm and everybody began looking for me and calling like rabid hyenas into the forest all around. Come nightfall they all concluded that something bad had happened to me.

Munene drove the Land Rover like a mad thing back to Main Camp. It was nine o'clock at night by the time he arrived there. At Main camp he had alerted Malindela. Tim was not in camp so Bruce had put Harry onto preparing a search party for the following morning. Harry immediately phoned Jack Parker in Dett and Jack, having heard that one of the Air Force's new helicopters was at Tjolotjo, made arrangements to have it stand by to help with the search in the morning.

The rest you now know.

One learns from one's mistakes – or you *should* do. I never again let panic control my actions.

* * *

Five days later we moved to the unnamed pan where we had caught and eaten the young ducks earlier in the year. We named the pan Amadada – *The pan of the ducks!* It has since been renamed – but for the purposes of this story

Amadada is the name by which I shall call it.

There were, in fact, two pans at Amadada. The one was deeper than the other. The deeper one still held a puddle of clear water in its middle. The other was just a mass of slippery slime wherein, upon our arrival, a host of muddy warthogs were digging about extracting and eating water lily tubers.

No sooner had the lorry arrived at Amadada than the trackers went into direct competition with the warthogs. Stripped naked and covered in slimy grime they dug deep with their hands feeling down into the liquid mud for the arm-thick water lily roots. We had arrived at just the right time. There were places in the mud that were a little too deep for the warthogs – but not too deep for the trackers. Out of these places the Bushmen came up with a seriously heavy harvest of tubers. That night everybody ate boiled water lily tubers with the last of their wildebeest stew. The stew had been cooked and re-cooked and added to with dry benghisa-ed meat. This had happened every day since I had shot the wildebeest on the first day of our arrival at Makalolo.

The roots were cleaned and cooked like one cleans and cooks sweet potatoes. They were bland, they tasted of nothing at all, but they filled up a space in everybody's tummies. This was a food source that the Bushmen tapped into every time we were on horse patrol during the latter part of summer. So it was familiar to me. Even though I knew it was just a *filler*, I showed willing and ate my portion of the tubers when Ben brought it to me that evening.

The next day I shot a kudu cow for rations. Ben and Mbuyotsi did the honours, skinning the carcass and cutting the meat into long ropes that they laid out over a sapling pole rack they constructed next to the kitchen campfire. They liberally sprinkled crushed salt over the meat whilst it was still wet – not the norm for benghisa-ed meat. It was then sun- and heat-dried, and cured, over a smoky fire.

I insisted the boys cut a rough track past the new camp before they finished with stumping the route they had just cut behind us. Within a few days, therefore, I had Land Rover access from Amadada to the Linkwasha-Makona-Lebuti bush road. It was time for me to have another go at the elephants of the Sehumi.

I laboured down to Makona Pan mostly in four-wheel-drive. Mbuyotsi sat in front on the seat across from mine. Ben stood on the back holding onto the vehicle's doorframe next to my right ear.

The old track road to Makona, running south, fed diagonally up the steep

side of an ancient sand dune. Here it was not necessary that I steer the Land Rover at all. The sand was so loose and so thick, and the old wheel ruts were so deep, that the wheels of the vehicle had nowhere else to go but to follow the furrows. On either side of the road msusu scrub covered the steep sloping side of the dune.

We passed Sitchetche Pan on top of the hill. This was another big pan that was earmarked for a new borehole and pump. We ran down the incline beyond that took us to Makona.

Makona Pan was half-full of water. It had a borehole that was normally equipped with just a windmill. The Veterinary Department official who was erecting the fence had, however, disengaged the windmill and had attached a temporary diesel engine to the pump. The shallow, eighteen-inches deep, circular trough, the top of its concrete walls flush with the ground, was full to the brim with crystal clear water. A stream from the overflow trickled down into the pan. There were elephant, buffalo and other game tracks everywhere.

Makona is located *right* on the park boundary. The water in the pan was just a few hundred yards from the boundary line. It had for years serviced the game animals that lived in both the game reserve *and* in the nearby Tjolotjo TTL. The water in the pan, I thought, was bound to attract elephants to the fence – when the fence eventually reached this point. I could just imagine what kind of pressure the elephants were going to exert on the fence here.

The veterinary officer's camp was set back from the pan, just inside the rim of thick bush beyond the open ground perimeter. He had chopped out the intervening brush no doubt to get a better view of the game animals that came down to drink in the evenings.

The camp was quite an elaborate establishment. Clearly, the man did not want to be uncomfortable. A battered old caravan was located under a giant lead wood tree. Next to the caravan, on the one side, there was a government canvas tent. On the other side, a table and two chairs had been set out in the shade of a large tarpaulin that was draped over a high mopani pole structure.

In the bushes, some distance away behind the caravan, there was a string of huge canvas sheets arranged into a number of dormitory tents. It reminded me of my camp at Macaha, from a time not so long ago. That, no doubt, was where the veterinary fencing-gang was housed.

There was a single native in camp – the camp guard. I presumed he was also the white man's cook. When I drew up beside the windmill, he came out to greet me.

"Sabona Nkosana," the man addressed me politely in Sindebele.

"Sabona Mdoda," I responded. *"Where is the Nkosi?"*

"He is up the Sehumi," the man advised me. *"He is repairing the fence where the elephants have broken it."* I was not surprised.

"Do the elephants cause much damage to the fence?" I asked the man innocently.

I had discovered that I was often able to get a lot of truthful information from casual conversations like this one. I hadn't met the veterinary man so I knew nothing about him. Talking with the camp guard was one way of gleaning information.

"All the time," the camp guard said. He was again brief – to the point. *"They break the fence every day."*

"How many elephant come here to drink?"

"Lots-and-lots", Nkosana. *"Lots-and-lots. They come mainly in the evening."*

"And buffalo?"

"Just bulls," the man said. *"They come in ones and twos – sometimes as many as six at a time. But there are no big herds of buffalo here."*

"Aren't you frightened?" I goaded the man with some jocularity.

"Aikona…" No – the man said laughing. *"The Nkosi has got a rifle. If the elephants or buffalo become dangerous he will shoot them."* I had caught a fish! I was learning something about the veterinary man.

"What kind of rifle does he have?" I inquired innocently.

"Anghaaasi…" the man replied honestly. *I don't know. "But it is a big one."*

I bid farewell to my newfound native friend, drove around the pan, and looked towards travelling along the rough track ahead that led northwards up the Sehumi. There were yesterday's-today's-andtomorrow's vehicle tracks on the ground, all around. The vehicles plied the track out of the camp every day of the week.

The veterinary man was employed on the government bush-system of twenty-five days on-the-job with the rest of the month 'off'. On his off days, the man visited his family in Bulawayo. It was a good system. It stopped government officials who worked deep in the bush from going bush-crazy.

I hadn't yet left the environs of the pan when Ben started thumping on the roof of the Land Rover cab. I stopped and leaned out the side window.

"Yes, Ben. What is it?"

"Nyati…" the tracker said. *Buffalo. "Very fresh."*

I stopped, opened the door of the Land Rover, and jumped out. *"Where?"* I inquired.

"You are standing on it," Ben laughed and jumped off the back of the vehicle to join me on the ground.

I looked down at my feet and saw the fresh tracks immediately.

"They are on top of the vehicle tracks – on top of the lorry and the Land Rover tracks that the veterinary man drove out in this morning."

"How many?"

"Two," Ben said after examining the tracks a little more closely.

"Three," Mbuyotsi said. He had progressed beyond the nose of the Land Rover and had found another set of fresh tracks.

"Three," Ben revised his count.

"When?"

"When did the veterinary man leave camp this morning?" The Bushman answered my question with his own question. *"The buffalo tracks are on top of his tracks."* Then he added, *"They are going into the TTL."*

I drove back to the veterinary man's camp and parked the Land Rover in front of the caravan. The camp guard told me everybody had left camp at the crack of dawn. He also told me that the buffalo had come in to drink at about seven o'clock and that they had left immediately afterwards. They had not loitered near the water.

I looked at my watch. It was just after eight o'clock. The buffalo had been here just one hour ago. It was too good an opportunity to miss.

"We are going after them," I told my trackers. *"Landa."*

We took up the tracks and followed the buffalo eastward into the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands. There were no people living anywhere near Makona. We travelled, therefore, into pristine African bush. Initially we passed through an extensive piece of msusu scrub but soon found ourselves inside heavy teak.

The tracking was easy. The sand was dry, loose and soft and the buffaloes' big hooves had ploughed through it laboriously. After drinking their fill, the big bulls' movements had been slow and lethargic. They had pulled their feet through the sand as they plodded along leaving long drag marks from one hoof print to the next.

We had only been on the tracks for half-an-hour when Ben stopped

suddenly, holding up his hand. I came to an abrupt halt. Mbuyotsi stopped behind me. Ben indicated that he had heard something. We all listened carefully.

After a while Ben turned to me and smiled. *"iNyoni"*, he said. *Birds*. He had heard the twittering calls of oxpeckers as they fossicked around, looking for ticks, on the buffaloes' black hides.

Hearing oxpeckers ahead, when you were on fresh buffalo tracks, could only mean one thing. We had found our buffaloes.

I tested the wind. It was blowing diagonally across our front towards the buffalo. That was not good. A sudden swirl in the wind current could give the buffaloes our scent. The trackers watched the movement of the ash as it drifted off, slowly descending, ahead of us.

Ben looked back at me. I made a silent indication with my hand that we should move to the right, and that we would then swing back into where the buffaloes were located further on. Our noses then would be into the wind. Ben nodded. He understood. He approved. He abandoned the tracks and headed diagonally off our route, to the right, into the thick undergrowth of the forest.

Over the next fifteen minutes we slowly and quietly closed with our quarry by shifting our downwind position according to the intermittent churring cues of the birds. During that whole time we never saw a buffalo's tracks and we never saw a buffalo. We never even heard them grunt. The oxpeckers guided us directly onto them.

The three big bulls were lying up in the teak undergrowth almost within touching distance of each other. The bush was not particularly thick but the cover, within three feet of the ground, was still in heavy leaf. This made it difficult to see our quarry and it required that we approach very closely.

Once we had them pegged I instructed both the trackers to stay behind whilst I made the final approach alone. I made this decision because the three of us, together, were making far too much noise walking through the dry leaves that blanketed the ground. Alone, walking slowly, I could choose my route. I could put my feet down where there were the least number of leaves. When I stopped all noise stopped with me. *Softly, softly, catchee monkey!*

I was ten yards from the buffaloes when I heard the first alarm snort. One of them must have picked up some tiny noise I had made. It could not have smelt me because the wind was blowing from them to me. The one that snorted *must* have heard me.

The next ten seconds are a blur in my memory.

A single buffalo rose up from the thick bushes right in front of me. He stood, for a moment, three quarters on to me. He looked around wildly. My rifle swung up ready to punch a bullet into his lungs. He saw me move and spun round to face me, nose high. The opportunity to shoot him in the lungs was gone.

The buffalo's eyes were wide open. He stared at me in obvious surprise. He swished his tail once. Then, in a burst of energy, he was in a full-blown charge.

One thing you learn very early on about hunting buffaloes is that when these sorts of encounters happen, the animals normally turn and run away. If they charge they mean business. There is no hunter alive who will tell you he has been *mock* charged by a buffalo. Buffalo do *not* mock charge. When they come at you their intention is to kill you.

I was still a greenhorn. I had expected this buffalo to turn and to run. I had my rifle up, the butt on my shoulder. I was ready to punch a bullet into his body behind the shoulder. Had I been able to do that the bullet would have smashed into his lungs. Tim Braybrooke had taught me well.

There was no time to consider *what* I was going to do *now*. What I *had* to do was to kill this buffalo – or it was going to kill me. There was only one way I was going kill it. I was going to have to put a bullet into his brain. And he was coming at me full bore.

My sights were on the buffalo's head. His head went down. My point of aim was then into the buffalo's neck above and behind the boss. I held my stance. I held my point of aim. With his first pounding lunge forward, his head came right up again. Both his front feet lifted and his legs thrust forward. This put my sights onto the buffalo's chest. His head started to fall. My sights remained constant.

They clawed their way upwards towards the buffalo's face as its head came down. They crept up and over his shiny black nose. The head continued to descend. I pulled the trigger.

The bullet slammed into the buffalo's face between nose and boss. It crashed through the heavy bone and travelled backwards into his brain. The buffalo collapsed, immediately, right in front of me.

I had no time to think about what might have happened had I not hit that brain. I now had two other buffaloes on their feet no more than ten paces in front of me.

I slammed another round into the breech and brought the rifle butt back to my shoulder. The first of the two buffaloes turned to run. I punched a bullet into its body behind the shoulder. The third one spun round and took off. I managed an angled shot – putting my bullet into the animal's body behind the ribcage, raking forward. My fourth shot hit the last one right in the centre of its anus. This, the game rangers irreverently called, *the Portuguese heart shot*. It is lethal.

Both the wounded buffaloes disappeared into the undergrowth. In one amazingly brief flash of time the hunt was over. Four shots had been fired. One buffalo lay dead at my feet. I was left standing alone in the teak forest listening to the pounding of two sets of hooves as the two wounded bulls made good their escape.

Ben was at my side feeding me ammo out of his cardboard box. I refilled the magazine and pushed the last round up the spout. I turned the safety catch to fully on and handed the weapon to Ben.

"Haaaieeee…." Mbuyotsi said as he walked over to the buffalo that was lying in front of us. *"Yena skellum loh…"* He looked at me and smiled. *"MUUuusheh Nkosana,"* he pronounced. *"MUUuusheh." This was a bad one*, he said. *You did good, Nkosana. You shot well.*

"Kanjaahn loh yena balekieleh?" he asked. *What about the ones that ran away?*

"Zonke mphafa," I told him. *Both have lung-shots.*

"Good," the Bushman nodded. *"Then all we have to do is to wait and to listen."*

After all the buffalo ration-hunting I had been doing every week I was beginning to see the wisdom in Tim Braybrooke's training. *"Bang them in the lungs,"* he had told me. *"Let them run off and listen for them bellowing. Don't be too hasty in following them up. Let the bullets first work their magic."* And that is exactly how it all happened. Hunting buffalo was beginning to work like clockwork for me. I was having no trouble killing them. I was beginning to get blasé. And *that* made me ready for a fall!

What I had not yet learnt about big game hunting was humility. My respect for the buffalo – and for the elephant – was falling as my competence grew. One day, soon, that *over-confidence* was going to be my undoing. It had nearly happened today. I had not expected the buffalo to charge me. I was not fully prepared for it. Fortunately, my instinct had brought me through. I had been lucky. Charging buffaloes are not easy to kill because

their heads are bouncing up and down all the while. And if your bullet does not find the brain – a rapidly moving target – the buffalo will *not* go down. Pumping bullet after bullet into their heads or bodies won't stop them.

"*Whah-whah…*" Mbuyotsi said, holding his hand up. He had heard something. We all listened. Way in the distance there came the sound of a buffalo bellowing.

"*Yena eefah,*" the tracker said, smiling at me. *He is dying.*

We did not hear the second buffalo's swansong so we followed both sets of tracks to make sure both animals were dead. An hour passed but we eventually found both the second *and* the third buffalo, dead. The first one of the two had run nearly a mile before he went down

Three buffalo bulls dead in one flashing instant of time. Under the circumstances, it had been a signal achievement.

We walked back to Makona and I drove up the Sehumi to meet the veterinary official. He was a nice, affable, man. I got along with him immediately. When I told him about the three dead buffaloes he immediately stopped all work on the fence and everybody returned to camp.

His driver took the Veterinary Department's Land Rover and, with two helpers and my two trackers, they wound their way through the teak forest to where the three carcasses lay. It took them two journeys to bring all the meat back to camp. The veterinary labourers then set about cutting up the meat and they prepared to benghisa it.

Whilst all this was going on, the veterinary man (I forget his name) and I sat at the camp table in his luxurious camp chairs, and we polished off the better part of a bottle of brandy between us. Brandy and coke – with ice! Deep in the Hwange bush! He had a stack of coca-colas in his tent like you can't imagine.

It was dark by the time the trackers and I arrived back at Amadada. In the back of the Land Rover there were four unskinned quarters of buffalo. This was a bonus for my men. That night the gang ate, one after the other, many thick slabs of fresh buffalo steak which they cooked by lying it directly on top of the glowing hot coals of their campfires. The party went on well into the early hours of the next morning.

All the while Mbuyotsi regaled them with tales of the hunt, and of how I had killed the charging buffalo. He told them of other hunts that he and I had conducted together, too. His superlatives, of course, were absurd and well over the top.

Ben sat quietly on the edge of the firelight and he listened to Mbuyotsi telling his tales.

Mbuyotsi was in good humour. He was excelling himself. I looked at the two of them and felt a warm glow pass through my body. What I was seeing was that which exemplified the huge differences in their respective personalities. I smiled to myself and I thought: *I must surely be working with two of the very best trackers and two of the very best patrol assistants in the whole big wide world.* What a team we made! I just hoped and prayed that nothing would pull us apart.

I shot two more elephant bulls on the fence line before I called a halt to my hunting on that trip. I was running out of petrol and I had to keep enough fuel in reserve to get me back to Main Camp. So we finished cutting and stumping the route for the new road right through to its junction with the old Linkwasha-Makona road. Our allotted task done, we then all went back to Main Camp.

* * *

We had been away for not two, but three weeks, during which time my elephant score had doubled. And I had experienced my second buffalo charge. I was taking to big game hunting like a duck takes to water. Every time I approached a dangerous animal now the trepidation was still there, the adrenaline still raced around in my veins, but my one time great fear of these animals had become a thing of the past. I was settling into my role as a big game hunter beautifully. It was a great feeling to have.

Babs had been advised by Jack Parker that I had been *'lost'* in the game reserve. She had got herself into a bit of a tizz. So the first evening after I got back Harry leant me his Land Rover and I went into Dett to see her. I was accepted into the Wilkinson household like a long lost son. I was taken aback by the concerns everyone expressed. And I was humbled at the relief they had all experienced when they had been later told that I had returned to Tum-Tum safe and sound. Babs had been distraught and was clearly very relieved to have me back. She fussed over me all evening as did her mother. I had dinner with the family and returned to Main Camp before midnight.

I was somewhat shocked by the consternation that my brief disappearance off the radar had caused in the Wilkinson family. I, personally, had thought nothing of it. My little adventure, to me, was just one of those *'things'* that happened. And I had come out of it unscathed. It felt strange being the focus of such attention. I was not used to being the emotional centre

of other people's lives.

Harry had told Bruce all about what had happened before my arrival back home. Like I had done, Bruce had accepted it all with total equanimity. He had not even discussed the matter with me when I got back, having obtained all the details from Harry. * * *

One of the first things I did when I got back was to ask permission from Bruce to saw in half the old elephant bull skull that lay at the back of the workshop. The honeycomb bone was very dry and very brittle. So, sawing the skull in half was very easy.

Once I had the skull in two halves, I leaned the two parts up against one of the workshop walls – one showing the inside configuration of the skull, the other the outside.

The one half showed me the size of the brain and where it was positioned inside the skull. The other half showed me the outside bone structure: the ear hole; the cavity where the tusk fitted; the position of the eye; and the location of the protruding cheekbone. Looking at the two parts standing side by side, I was able to – mentally – superimpose the one upon the other. And there I had the position of the brain, relative to the skull's outer bone structure, exposed.

It became immediately and glaringly obvious to me that the ear hole was the best guide to where the brain lay. In fact, I could see that, in the skull-halves before me, the ear hole (viewed from the side) ran straight into the middle of the brain cavity. And I worked out that if I were to run a rod from one ear hole to the other, the rod would pass right through the hind-third of the brain.

I knew, however, that the ear orifice, on the outer skin, opened up to the outside world some distance behind the ear hole in the skull. You have to push your hand quite far forward into the ear orifice from the outside if you want to get your fingertip into the ear hole in the skull. I concluded, therefore, that if you put a bullet (from the side) directly into the external ear orifice, the bullet would pass through the back part of the brain. So aiming in front of the ear hole, as Tim Braybrooke had prescribed, was indeed the right thing to do. I also concluded that it was better to err by placing your bullet closer to the ear hole than to the elephant's eye.

Now! How do I find the brain from the front?

I tried to think back on that frontal confrontation with the elephant when my bullet had failed to find the brain. What were the things that I remembered? The eyes and eyebrows! The socket swelling on the face where

the tusks were carried inside the head! The top of the head! The cheekbones! No ear holes! The ear holes had been hidden somewhere behind the cheekbones!

I looked at the skull in front of me. The cheekbones were one of the most prominent features of the skull's structure. I tried to visualize just where the eye was locatedl.

To find the brain you must draw a line between the eye and the ear hole. Place your bullet one third forward of the ear hole…. I could remember Tim telling me that the very first time. I now tried to draw that line – in my mind – on the skull in front of me.

Suddenly I had the formula. And I knew I had it.

I looked at the skull again. I looked at my imaginary line drawn between the eye placement and the ear hole. I saw immediately that my imaginary line ran parallel to the natural line and flow of the cheekbone. I also saw that the gap between my imaginary line and the top of the cheekbone was exactly the same as the width of the cheekbone itself.

I put my thinking cap on. I needed a ditty to help me remember.

Basically, to find an elephant's brain from the front all you have to do is to determine the location of the two ear holes. Aim between the ear holes and pull the trigger.

But how do you find the ear holes when you can't *see* them? You look at the cheekbones! Gauge the width of the outer surface of the cheekbone. Add that width to the top of the cheekbone along its entire length – to the back. And there, at the back of the cheekbone, the width of the cheekbone above the cheekbone, lies the ear hole. Do the same on the other side and you have located *both* your ear holes even though you can't see them. The final formula remains the same. Aim dead centre between the two ear holes and pull the trigger.

The width of the cheekbone; above the cheekbone; At the back of the cheekbone. There was my ditty.

That little rhyme enabled me to find my elephant's brain – every time – whenever I was presented with a frontal brain shot. And having worked that out, and never forgetting Tim's formula for finding an elephant's brain from the side, very soon had me automatically *'seeing'* an elephant's brain deep inside its head – no matter what the angle. *'Seeing'* the brain was even better

than looking for guidelines on the features of an elephant's face, to find it. It took a lot more elephant hunting, however, to make this final accomplishment possible.

* * *

Big changes had happened at Main Camp in my absence cutting tracks into Hwecau, Tum-Tum and Amadada pans.

The biggest immediate change was that everybody, in my absence, had been issued with uniforms. It was only in March that a tailor had measured us. So, everybody was surprised when they arrived just two months later. Government normally didn't work that efficiently.

We were now all required to wear khaki shirts with breast pockets. They also had epaulette tags on the shoulders onto which we had to slip dark green tags with the insignia, inscribed in gold lettering: NATIONAL PARKS.

Our shorts were made of a surprisingly good material. They were golden-brown in colour, a little darker than the shirts. There were long khaki socks with dark green hose-tops. These we were required to wear at the *'military-regulation'* level – four-finger-breadths below the knee. Our footwear was light brown suede veldschoen ankle boots. They were of the type that we always wore anyway but, with this arrangement, we got two pairs free every year.

Finally, we were issued with an Australian wide-brimmed bush hat – which was not to be worn with the one side buttoned up. The dress code stipulated that the entire brim was to remain down at all times. The brim had to be ironed stiff and flat from time to time. There was a dark green pugaree around the base of the hat's crown – which gave the hat a bit of class. And there was a small gold-coloured metal badge depicting the government coat of arms. This we had to fix to the hat in the front-middle of the pugaree.

Our annual allocation was to be three shirts, two pairs of epaulette insignia tags, two shorts, three pairs of socks, two pairs of boots, one hat and one hat badge. If we wanted more we had to buy them.

Those of us who worked on horseback were also given two pairs of Australian stockmen's riding slacks – khaki in colour. They were narrower in the leg than normal long pants and they were reinforced with stitched-on extra-layers of material on the insides of the legs, below the knee – but they were not jodhpurs. When you were standing in them they looked just like ordinary, narrow-legged, long trousers. Very smart!

Very smart though the riding slacks may have been they were no match for Hwange's sinanga. The very next horse patrol I went on the hook thorns tore my one pair of riding slacks to pieces. I had to throw them away. I reverted to my old civilian short trousers (never my new uniform ones) when I went on horse patrol. I tolerated the odd scratched leg as a consequence. Normally, I just got off the horse and led it through the thick stuff whenever that was necessary. Tim, of course, continued to wear his lion-skin chaps. I never ever wore long trousers of any description when on horse patrol.

When hunting, we all discovered that the buttoned-at-the-top epaulettes got snagged in the bushes that we were all the time required to squeeze past, or they were hooked by hook thorns. They were actually, therefore, a danger to our lives when we were hunting dangerous game.

We all tried various things to get past the problem. We unbuttoned the epaulettes, removed the insignia tags, and let the epaulette material hang down, like mini-flaps, from our shoulders. Some rangers bought extra shirts and cut off the epaulettes completely. These shirts were reserved for wearing on the days that we went out hunting. In later years, I only cut off the epaulette slips when I had old shirts that I was prepared to vandalise.

Other rangers went one step further. They cut off the sleeves at the shoulder seams, entirely, making the shirts sleeveless. I never did that. I was never in the kind of financial position that enabled me to buy so many extra shirts. The other alternative – and this I did regularly – was that I continued to wear civilian clothes when I went out hunting.

Other than the fact we wore uniforms at all times – except when we were on horse patrol or when we were hunting – life went on as before.

* * *

Heavy earth moving equipment of all shapes and sizes had also come to the game reserve. The road building contractors had set up camp near Shapi – half way to Shumba. Bulldozers had already started to clear the route for the new tarmac road – Main Camp to Shumba. Beyond Shumba, right up to Robin's Camp, the dirt road comprised heavy gravels so there were no plans to tar that section. The new tarred road was designed to cover, only, the fifty-mile Kalahari sand region between Main Camp and Shumba.

* * *

Two new members of staff had arrived. Dick Sharples was a short, bowlegged and balding cockney builder who had come to supervise a series

of planned developments at Main Camp. His assistant was an elderly, lean, six-foot four-inch tall and balding Scotsman called Claude Murray.

Dick and his wife were temporarily housed in one of the Rest Camp chalets. Claude, a bachelor, was accommodated in one of the outside bedrooms at single quarters adjacent to my own. He automatically became part of the single quarters establishment and he paid his dues just as did Tim and I.

Two new staff houses, located between the existing two tourist officer houses and the old administration office, were under construction. They were small two bedroomed units and they were already up to windowsill height. Further along, just in front of the entrance to the rest camp, the foundations of a new office block had been completed up to floor level. Dick was not letting much grass grow under his feet!

One evening, shortly after my return from my road-cutting patrol, I walked back to single quarters from the office. As I approached the unit I heard some of the most beautiful violin music I had ever heard. It was coming from Claude Murray's bedroom. I tippy toed to the doorway and looked inside. Claude was standing in the middle of the room with a violin to his chin. His eyes were shut tight and his right arm was plying the bow in smooth and steady strokes.

I was mesmerized. I sneaked silently into the room and lay down on Claude's bed, looking up at the maestro. He was oblivious to my presence. For a full half-an-hour I indulged myself in his music. Not once did he open his eyes. Not once did he stop playing.

After that I plagued him every evening to take up his violin and to play for me some of his beautiful music. I couldn't get enough of it. Claude, being a Scotsman, didn't, of course, call his instrument a violin. He called it a *'fiddle'*.

* * *

At about this time there was an interesting development that is worthy of reporting. It didn't concern me but that does not make it any less interesting.

A group of six bull elephants pitched up in the teak forests north of Lupane, half way between Main Camp and Bulawayo on the Victoria Falls-to-Bulawayo main road. They were not near the main road but about thirty miles north of it. In living memory there had never been elephants in this area. The six bulls began raiding the local people's crops. The Native

Commissioner phoned Bruce and asked for his assistance.

Bruce sent off Tim and Harry to deal with them. They found the elephants easily enough and they killed all six bulls without too much trouble. They came home after making the Native Commissioner responsible for collecting the ivory.

Two weeks later Bruce received another phone call from Lupane. This time the N.C. asked for Bruce's assistance to deal with a large herd of elephant cows and calves that had pitched up in exactly the same area. Once again Bruce sent Tim and Harry to deal with them. The two rangers shot out the whole herd which numbered twenty-three animals.

The nearest point in the game reserve, to where these elephants had pitched up in the Lupane area, was Ngamo – about one hundred miles away to the south. I later listened in on Bruce's discussions with Tim and Harry. They probed all the possibilities as to how and why the bulls had got there in the first place and, secondly, how the cows had got to exactly the same place two weeks later.

It was concluded that the bulls had been fenced out of the game reserve by the new game fence at Ngamo and down the Sehumi; that they had been harassed by our collective hunting pressure in the Tjolotjo teak forests; and that they had run off to the north to escape the killing fields.

It must be remembered that Tim and I were now hunting independently. Harry joined the fray periodically – when he could spare the time away from overhauling the game water supply pumping units. For every elephant that I shot Tim and Harry shot similar numbers. And the local people were stripping the carcasses so there was the constant smell of fresh elephant meat all along the upper Sehumi and into the adjacent Tjolotjo forests. It could be expected, therefore, that the elephants outside the park were getting jittery.

Everyone concluded that the bulls had gone off to reconnoitre a new and safe habitat into which they could escape. Somehow, they had communicated this to the cows that waited to see the outcome of what the bulls had found. When the bulls did not return, the cows must have assumed they had found somewhere suitable to live elsewhere, and they had followed them.

Wherever elephants go through heavily vegetated country – especially bulls – they leave behind them a strong trail of musth-gland scent on the leaves. Musth is a scent that even we humans can smell. It would not be difficult, therefore, for cow elephants to follow this musky trail in order to

track down the bulls that went before them. Nobody at Main Camp could come up with any other explanation. This conclusion was guesswork but it was based upon reasonable assumptions with which everybody concurred.

* * *

When I was twelve years old my parents gave me a .22 single-shot rifle for Christmas. At that time my father was an assistant-manager on a farm south of Marandellas. Since I had been party to the shooting of a grey duiker – when I was nine – I had been gun and hunting crazy. I guess my parents realized that I was not going to change and, as nearly all my school friends owned .22 rifles, they decided it was time that I got one too.

With the rifle came two packets of cartridges each containing fifty rounds. One hundred cartridges was my quota for each of the three school holidays during the year when I came home from boarding school.

There was another stipulation. I was not to shoot anything that I was not prepared to eat myself – or that was not eaten by ‘someone’ else. That ruled out my shooting of eagles and vultures of which there were plenty in the Marandellas area in those days. Duiker, steenbuck, guineafowl, francolins and doves, however, were all fair game, as were dassies (hyraxes) which were ubiquitous in the granite hill country where we lived.

Every holiday I shot large numbers of dassies which my good friend Daniel Moyo – a Shona piccanin of my own age – took to feed his family. His mother, unbeknown to me at the time, kept all the skins. She tanned them when I was back at school and, one year later, she presented me with the most gorgeously soft dassie skin kaross (blanket) that you can imagine.

One hundred cartridges per school holiday were not enough to satisfy my needs. Inside the first week or ten days they were all gone. The procedure then was that I had to somehow earn enough money to buy the extra rounds that I wanted.

That rule saw Daniel and me, and a host of other native children (Daniel’s friends), working in my mother’s rose and vegetable garden to earn the required amount of money. It saw us every day pushing wheelbarrows full of powdery dry cattle manure, from the bullpen next to the dairy, down to the house. The manure had to be spread around the plants and it had to be dug into the ground for best effect. It was hard and laborious work but it did earn us the odd extra packet of ammo.

Then, one day, a neighbouring farmer visited us. His name was Beau

Lockey. He laughed when he saw me working in the garden. Despite our huge age difference, I knew Beau well. We had often gone springhare hunting at night to rid his farm of these destructive pests. He inquired why it was necessary for me to work in the garden; and I told him.

Beau had recently got married – to Diana Du Preez – the most beautiful young lady in the whole district (at least I thought so). He had built a new house for his bride. Right in front of the house was a big termite mound on which grew some large trees and sundry bushes. Beau surrounded the whole anthill with half-inch chicken-wire-mesh fixed to a gum pole superstructure. This made a huge aviary with an abundance of natural vegetation inside. Now Beau needed wild birds to stock it.

If I could find a way to catch birds, Beau informed me, he would pay me for the birds in *'bullets'*. Was that not, he asked, a more *'manly'* way to buy cartridges for my rifle?

This arrangement held great promise. And Beau was dead right. It was much better than working in my mother's garden.

Daniel and I got our heads together. He knew how to catch birds, he told me. But if he taught me how to do that, he said, he wanted something in return. He wanted me to teach him how to shoot with the rifle.

This was another one of my taboos. No self-respecting white man, I had been informed, would teach a native how to use a rifle. I had been told, specifically, that I was not allowed to let my good friend, Daniel Moyo, handle my .22.

The Matebele War of 1893 and the Mashona Rebellion of 1896 were still fresh in the memories of white Rhodesian society. That may have been the case but it was not something that I knew anything about. It was not something that I cared about either. And I was always frantic to get my hands on more ammunition. Against my parent's wishes, I agreed to teach Daniel how to shoot with the rifle.

The son of a farm labourer, Daniel Moyo was my best and only real friend on the farm. My two brothers were both, at that stage, too young and too small to be my hunting companions. Daniel became my *manFriday*. It was because of Daniel's friendship that I became completely fluent in Chi-Sezuru, an mSezuru dialect of the Mashona language.

Daniel and I set about our task with enthusiasm. He first taught me how to make string from the inner cambium bark of msasa tree saplings. This I did by rolling two very thin strips of the cambium fibre at the same time, but

separately, under the palm of my hand and on my naked thigh. When I ran the two rolled strips together they twisted and twined against themselves forming a stout natural cord.

Next we made three *'rings'* out of thin, debarked, sapling sticks – bending the thin sticks round to form a circle. The rings were about eighteen inches across. We bound the overlapping ends with raw cambium bark. Finally, we tied the strings we had made across the circular frames, criss-cross and two inches apart. This made the traps look like a very rough tennis racket without the handle. This was the foundation for our bird trap.

We then retired to the Friesland bullpen at the dairy and we carefully plucked the bull's long, strong, tail hairs from the barbs on the barbedwire fence. With a handful of the hairs in our hands we went into my bedroom where the two of us laboriously affixed each hair to the strings on our traps, two inches apart. Finally, with a simple twist we made a noose out of each hair – leaving the long outer part of the hair in place as a tail. Each trap took us a whole day to construct.

When we had three traps complete we went into the long-grassed wet vlei in front of the house – with a spade from my mother's garden – and we opened up several areas of open ground about one yard square amongst the heavy grass.

We then went to the nearby Gumboleh River and came back with a bucketful of dry, soft, alluvial sand. This we spread over the open patches, one inch thick. We were now ready to set our traps. But first we had to bait them. This required that we spread handfuls of white mealiemeal across the centre of each bare patch. Having flattened the grass all around we retired to a distance and patiently waited, and we watched, for the birds to visit the sites.

In all of this I took my direction entirely from Daniel. The project was his baby! This, I was informed, was how the native children helped to feed themselves. They caught small birds in this manner, which they killed, plucked, cooked over a fire in the veld, and which they ate.

White kids ate potato crisps, chips and hamburgers as snacks. The black kids in the rural areas ate little birds, and rats and mice, cooked to a crisp over the hot coals of a wood fire.

When the birds were familiar with coming to the baits for food we set the traps. We first re-baited the sites with handfuls of dry mealiemeal and spread it out flat. Then Daniel placed one of our circular traps on the centre-top of

each bait. Carefully and gently he pushed the racket-shaped trap downwards, working it slowly from side to side, until the rim of the sapling frame had disappeared completely beneath the soft river silt. By that stage all the strings were buried, too. When you looked at the site all you could see was the white mealiemeal bait and the mass of white bullhair nooses that stood above it.

We had prepared a wooden carry-box with a mosquito-gauze wire front, and made it ready to receive the birds that we caught. We sat with the box in our hands and we watched the birds flying in and out of the openings where the traps lay. I grew impatient. After only five minutes I wanted to go and see how many birds we had caught. Daniel knew better. He made me wait.

When we finally rushed over to the first trap a flock of birds took off in a flurry. A number stayed behind struggling to get free. Some had nooses around their necks. Others had nooses around their feet. Daniel quickly covered each bird, one at a time, with his one hand. By pulling on the tails of the nooses that had caught them, he opened each noose and pulled the bird free. One at a time, he popped each bird into the box.

In the first trap we caught five birds at the first sitting. There were eight in the second one and eight in the third one. In our very first attempt we had secured twenty-one birds. None were killed or maimed.

By that evening we had captured over sixty birds. They comprised red bishop birds, orange-breasted waxbills, common waxbills, a number of masked weavers and some quelea finches in full breeding plumage.

So impressed was my father at this result, he drove Daniel and me over to Beau Lockey's farm that very evening. And so impressed was Beau that he gave me two packets of ammunition immediately – as an incentive. He released the birds there and then – without counting them – into his aviary.

Every school holiday after that Daniel and I caught birds for Beau Lockey's aviary and he rewarded us with many packets of ammunition. One day we caught two Paradise Wydahs – lovely yellow, orange and black birds with long flowing black tails. Each of those birds earned us one whole packet of ammunition. After that we became more selective. We moved our trap sites and caught different birds to the common ones we had started catching. Very soon we were catching yellow-backed bishop birds, cut throat and white-winged widow birds, blue waxbills and red-billed fire-finches. Beau was thrilled and he paid us our just rewards.

So it was that, thereafter, for more than a year, Daniel and I were never

short of ammunition. So it was, too, that I taught Daniel Moyo how to shoot with my .22 rifle.

Then tragedy struck. One night Beau went out from his house to shoot a leopard that had been killing his sheep. Getting through a barbedwire fence with his twelve-gauge shotgun, the weapon discharged by accident and Beau was killed.

Shortly after that my family relocated from Marandellas to Karoi – 250 miles away in the far north of the country. It was in the Karoi area, a few years later, that my parents purchased their own farm, then a second one. Daniel Moyo and I were separated. I never forgot the lessons I had learnt from him, however, about how to catch birds with nooses made from Friesland bull tail-hairs.

* * *

Sometime mid-1961, Bruce Austen received a letter from Ted Davison. The old man advised Bruce that the game animals we had captured at Ngamo, and sent to Lake McIllwaine National Park just outside Salisbury city, had become heavily infested with ticks. The eland, in particular were very badly affected. The ticks festooned the elands' ears and, eventually, this caused the whole ear to drop off. Many other species of introduced game had also been similarly infested.

Tick infestations were being encountered in the Matopos game park, too.

Mister D. informed Bruce that we should try to catch oxpeckers for introduction to both Lake McIllwaine and the Matopos. Oxpeckers are nature's answer to tick infestations in game.

Throughout Rhodesia oxpeckers had long ago been exterminated in cattle country because of the use of arsenical dips by farmers. Dipping cattle once a week, in an arsenical-poison plunge-bath, kept the country's domestic animals free of ticks. But it was not possible to dip the wild game animals of our smaller national parks. So tick infestations, outside those game reserves where oxpeckers occurred naturally, became a major problem for the national park administrations.

In his letter, Mister D. had suggested one of the most bizarre ideas I have ever heard. He told Bruce that he should try to catch oxpeckers by first conditioning them to eat pieces of raw mince off the backs of the Main Camp patrol donkeys. Then, when the birds had become used to feeding on the mince, it should be soaked in alcohol. All that would be necessary after that,

the letter explained, was that a game ranger be tasked to follow the donkey around to pick up the inebriated birds.

I like to believe that Mister D. had passed on this instruction to Bruce with tongue in cheek. He was a very intelligent man and a highly experienced game warden. I cannot believe that he *really* believed what he had suggested in that letter.

Oxpeckers loved to fossick about on the donkeys' bodies at Main Camp, searching for and eating what ticks they could find. When there were no ticks, they opened up wounds from which they drank the donkeys' blood. When the donkeys were old – and unable to continuously shrug off the pestering birds – these wounds were visited daily. The results were often horrific. I have seen donkeys with hip-bone sores – made solely by oxpeckers – that sometimes reached right down to the very hip joints themselves. Donkeys that suffered these kinds of wounds simply *had* to be put down.

Ted Davison's targeting of the donkeys at Main Camp, as the means to catch oxpeckers was, therefore, very sound. He knew they were a focus of the oxpeckers' attention. His ideas about just how they should be caught, if what he had said was serious, however, were not worthy of consideration.

Bruce, who loved his whisky, immediately laughed. *"Bring me a government requisition book,"* he demanded of nobody in particular. There was a gleam in his eye. *"Now… How am I going to describe this,"* he joked. *"Two cases of whisky – for oxpeckers – the catching of."* He laughed loudly at the idea.

"I think I can catch you oxpeckers," I volunteered. I was remembering how Daniel Moyo and I had caught birds in hair nooses when we were both piccanins at Marandellas. I believed I could do something similar to catch oxpeckers. I had immediate visions of me making a harness full of nooses that I could strap to a donkey's back.

"And how do you propose to do that?" Bruce asked me rather pompously. His mood was morosely jocular. I think he was seriously contemplating using an official government requisition to purchase a case of whisky!

I gave him a rough idea about what I was thinking. I *would use wildebeest tail hairs,* I said, *to make nooses to catch the birds. They were thicker and much stronger than any domestic bull's tail hairs.*

"Hah!" Bruce exclaimed. *"I tell you what,"* he looked at me askance. *"I will eat the first oxpecker you catch with a wildebeest's tail hair – without*

salt." He laughed hugely at the idea.

I raised my eyebrows. I was deadly serious. I believed that I really *could* catch oxpeckers in nooses made from a wildebeest's tail hairs.

"*Can I give it a try?"* I asked Bruce with some trepidation.

"Jah," he laughed. *"On one condition! If you don't succeed you buy me a bottle of whisky. If you do succeed I eat the bird."*

The wager was set. *"O.K.,"* I smiled. It was quite a wager. I was in no position to suggest any alterations. But I was sure I could catch oxpeckers with the plan I was developing in my head. *"O.K."* I repeated. *"You are on."*

I was getting bold. How on earth had I got myself into this position? How had I come to talk to the great Malindela like this?

Bruce looked at me speculatively. Then he smiled. *"O.K.,"* he said. *"The bet is on."*

Harry, who was a bystander in the office looking on, raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips. The little boy was getting bold. Maybe too bold!

At that stage we had all moved into the new office block. It was a combined field and tourism office with a big tourist reception area in the front. Behind the counter – which stretched right across the front tourism reception room – a central passage fed back into a large, open-plan, field officers' common room. On either side of the passage, doors fed off to two offices. One was the Senior Game Warden's office. The other was occupied by the station's two tourist officers, Ian Miller and Fred Starkey.

On one side of the big communal game rangers' office, at the back, there was a walk-in armoury. This was where the station's firearms and ammunition were stored. There was a back verandah with a toilet on one side. Finally, there was a front verandah that stretched right across the front of the building. Rockeries had been constructed on either side – built by the Curator of the Ewangrigg Botanical Gardens (a national park responsibility located just outside Salisbury City). Yours truly did all the donkeywork. Helping to build these rockeries was just one of many peculiar jobs I was required to perform. Being the youngest member of staff – the dog's body – I was at everybody's beck-and-call. I was called upon to function wherever and whenever someone was in need of help.

It was in the game rangers' big new common-room-office that Bruce blustered out his challenge. I was happy about the challenge. After all I had been through with John Hatton in the Matopos, I was very content to be treated as one-of-the-boys at Main Camp.

* * *

How to catch an oxpecker!

To cut a long story short, I made a spindly harness – just big enough to cover the withers of a donkey – out of strong black fishing cord (not nylon). It was two feet square. I attached a long additional cord – a fastening cord – to each of the four corners. Every two inches across the harness's two lateral sides, I fastened other cords which stretched right across the harness from one side to the other. There were, therefore, twelve cross-cords in all. And to support these twelve cross-cords I affixed and tied (at every crossing point) a single dorsal cord as well. All knots on the harness were spot-glued in position. This was all accomplished with the help of a wooden frame that I made especially for the purpose. The frame was also used to carry and to store the harness when it was not in use. The whole contraption was held in place, on the wooden frame, by the protruding heads of small nails hammered into the wood at strategic places.

Wildebeest tail hairs were then affixed to the cross-cords at two-inch intervals right along their lengths. Each cross-cord, therefore, carried twelve wildebeest tail hairs. So the whole cross-cord matrix comprised 144 hairs. Each tail hair was tied onto the cross-cords with solid knots and spot-glued in position.

The frame, complete with its harness, was then placed on a table. A sheet of typing paper was inserted between each of the cross-cords. This effectively separated the lines of tail hairs. Taking each cross-cord at a time, each tail hair was tied into a noose using a simple knot. The surplus hair-ends were not cut off. They were left in place because, by pulling on them, the nooses could be easily opened and the birds they had snared could be quickly released.

I selected a donkey to which the oxpeckers were normally most greatly attracted. The trackers tethered it to a metal stake that we hammered into the ground, right out in the open in the middle of the Main Camp vlei.

By taking a front-end and a rear-end corner-string in each of our hands, Mbuyotsi and I were able to lift the harness off its wooden frame and, with arms outstretched, we placed it squarely over the donkey's withers. The two front-end corner-strings were then tied together beneath the donkey's neck, and the two rear-end corner-strings were tied behind and beneath its ample belly.

We then retired to my Land Rover fifty yards away. And there we waited for the oxpeckers to come.

Within minutes a single oxpecker alighted on the donkey. It scrambled over the donkey's withers. Other oxpeckers twittered around, flying in a group overhead. Within seconds of it landing the first oxpecker became ensnared. I wasted no time. I rushed out of the Land Rover and raced towards the donkey. In next to no time I had the bird in my hand. I pulled on the tail of the noose. It opened and released the oxpecker.

I looked at the bird in my hand. It was a yellow-billed oxpecker in excellent condition.

Mbuyotsi was by my side. "Stay here next to the donkey," I instructed him. "I don't want any more oxpeckers caught – not just yet. I want to *take this one to show Malindela."*

I raced back to the Land Rover leaving the tracker to look after the donkey. With the oxpecker in one hand I drove to the office. I waited for no one. I had caught my first oxpecker and I wanted to show Bruce Austen that my plan had worked. At least, now, I was assured that I would *not* have to buy Malindela a bottle of Scotch.

Bruce had a visitor. He was Bob Smith, the Deputy Director of National Parks, all the way from Salisbury. I knew Bob Smith from my Matopos days so I wasn't over-awed by him. In fact I 'owed' him! If it wasn't for Bob Smith's intervention I would not have come to Main Camp.

I knocked on Malindela's office door. *"Yes?"* Bruce's voice was clipped, abrupt, and authoritative. *"I am busy."*

I opened the door. *"Yes Sir,"* I said, respectfully, through the halfopened jamb. Bruce got up from behind his desk and moved towards the door.

"I understand you are busy, Mr. Austen… Sir," I said almost obsequiously. *"I beg your pardon, Mister Smith,"* I said to Malindela's guest. *"This can't wait."* Bob Smith smiled at me and bobbed his head.

I turned to Bruce and I said: *"I just thought you would like to know I have caught my first oxpecker."* I held the bird out towards him so that he could see it clearly.

Bruce Austen was essentially a military man. He had served in the British Royal Air Force throughout the Second World War. After the war, after he had returned to Rhodesia in 1946, he had joined the Rhodesian Staff Corp. This was the military establishment that was the forerunner of the new post-war Rhodesian army. Bruce's bearing was austere – authoritative – military.

Bruce Austen's uniforms were always immaculate. His short khaki

trousers and his clean new shirts were always lightly starched and beautifully ironed. Today was no exception. In his new national park uniform Bruce Austen looked stunning. You could have pulled him through a ring.

I held my first captured oxpecker towards Malindela. There was a satisfied smirk on my face. The back of the bird, wings secured between my fingers and thumb, was towards the palm of my hand. The bird's tummy was facing directly towards my commanding officer.

Now… the oxpecker's principal diet is blood. Oxpeckers eat bloated ticks to ingest the blood the ticks contain in their swollen bodies. They eat the scabs off animals' bodies – which are, essentially, dried blood. And when there are no bloated ticks to feed upon they will open up an animal's wounds and make them bleed again, so that they can drink the blood that oozes out. And when the birds' are excited, or frightened, they expel semi-digested blood from their tummies. They squirt it out in smelly black liquid faeces.

That is exactly what happened next.

When I pushed the bird towards Bruce – so he could see it better – its cloaca was facing the game warden. The oxpecker waited for that exact moment to evacuate its bowels. A gigantic squirt of stinking black shit splattered on Malindela's brand new and beautifully ironed uniform – both his shirt *and* his short trousers. And it stank something horrible.

Bruce froze. A look of abject disgust flushed over his face. I blanched. I went cold. Gone was all my temerity of a few moments before.

"I… I… I" stammered, trying to find an excuse for what had happened.

"Get out of my office," Bruce spat the words at me. He was furious. Without a word I turned and bolted. The door slammed shut behind me.

I never heard another word about the incident.

Within two days I had twenty oxpeckers in carrier boxes. They were shipped off to the Matopos and released. Within a week another twenty went off to Lake McIllwaine. There they were released directly onto the park's giraffe.

The Matopos inoculation took. The McIllwaine one did not.

In later years a young research officer called Hans Grobler, Jurie Grobler's, nephew, caught more oxpeckers using my trapping method as his guide. He used the oxpeckers that he caught to reinforce the Matopos oxpecker population that I had originally introduced. They are now firmly established and breeding well.

All this came about because a Shona piccanin that I had befriended in my youth had long ago taught me how his people caught small birds to eat. If anybody deserved an accolade for successfully introducing oxpeckers into the Matopos, therefore, it isn't me – or Hans. Daniel Moyo, who once lived on the farm, Mere Estates, just south of Marandellas, deserves all the credit.

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The provision of early-in-the-season surface water at Makona Pan attracted large numbers of elephant from inside the park, to that part of the boundary line with the Tjolotjo TTL. So immediately after the oxpecker capture, Malindela sent me back down to the fence to attend to a buildup of elephants that had been reported.

I told him that I believed the water that was being pumped into Makona Pan, by the Veterinary official who was camped there, was probably the reason why so many elephants were moving out of the park in that area. The man had no authority to pump water into the pan although he had done it with every good intention. I suggested that perhaps we should keep Makona dry – at least until the fence line had progressed beyond the pan.

It seemed that my psyche made me happy when I was shooting elephants that *had* to be shot, but it unsettled me when the fair-play element was suspect.

Bruce looked at me and he smiled. *"You mean you don't want to go down there to shoot elephants that have been enticed out of the park?*" He asked almost mischievously. He *knew* that I loved to hunt elephants – anywhere – any time!

"*Something like that…"* I responded hesitantly.

Malindela shook his head. *"You bloody little hypocrite…!"* Bruce exclaimed, with a broad smile. *"Why the hell are we shooting elephants there at all?"* Bruce asked me brusquely.

"To protect the game fence, and to reduce the numbers in the Park!"

"So…?" He raised his eyebrows and looked at me inquiringly. *"Does it really matter if they have been enticed out of the park at Mako-na? The alternative is that we cull them* inside *the park."* I got the message.

"We don't want to shoot them inside *the park. That is why we are shooting them* outside *the park."*

Bruce looked at me, shook his head, and raised his eyebrows. The gesture begged the question: *Do you understand?* I nodded. I understood.

"Well then…" Bruce said in parting. *"Go down there and shoot the shit out of them."* He shook his head again and, as he turned away, I heard him muttering to himself. *"You kids…"* I heard him say. He walked into his office and shut the door quietly behind him.

So I went down to Makona to *'shoot the shit'* out of however many elephants I could find. I camped with my new found friend, the veterinary man, at Makona.

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There were lots of odd elephant bulls all along the Sehumi. These were big, big bulls that had no trouble walking across the fence. So they were often one side of the fence one day and across the fence the next day. And the game fence got damaged every time they crossed it. It made me wonder if the fence was not just a waste of time and effort.

There were also one or two groups of smaller bulls that numbered between three and six animals. These animals tended to stay on one side of the fence, or the other, but they always tested its strength when they came up to it. These visitations, too, damaged the fence.

The poor veterinary man was doing his nut trying to repair all the damages. And yet the fence progressed, moving ever more closely to Makona Pan every day. I admired the man's tenacity.

I set myself a priority. I decided to take on the job of taking out the big bulls first. They were the biggest menace. This I did, one by one. My second priority was to tackle the groups of smaller bulls. When I hunted them I normally managed to take more than one from every contact.

Although I shot many buffaloes on the Sehumi, hunting buffalo was not a major priority in my mind. Hunting elephants always took centre stage.

Every day my experience grew. Every day my score mounted. Every day my confidence lifted one notch higher.

I was itching to be confronted, again, by a bull that stood and challenged me. I wanted a chance to test my new theories about finding the brain with a frontal brain-shot. Gone was all my fear of what might happen should my shooting be poor. I was beginning to realize that I had to be bold to get the results I wanted. Timidity was not a part of my game plan.

I knew that, sooner or later, that challenge would come. So, as much as I wanted it to happen, I did not push it. The side-head brain-shot was a proven pushover for me. As I have explained before, in my final approaches I always

tried to maneouvre myself into a position that would allow me to take this easiest of all the brain-shots.

I did not provoke a challenge. That, I decided, would be foolhardy. Why push my luck when everything was going my way? I believed that, theoretically, I now had the formula to find the brain from any angle. But I determined to apply that formula, for the very first time, only when it was absolutely necessary. When it was ready to happen, it would happen.

Caution was my constant companion. This was a good time in my growing big game hunting experience. Bravado was not in my vocabulary. I got results because I worked hard at my hunting. I got results because I was a passionate hunter. I got results because hunting Africa's dangerous big game animals was the driving force that kept me going. I did not want to cut it all short by being stupid.

I got results, too, because I had excellent tracker support. Ben and Mboyotsi were always at my side. They gave me all the support that I could possibly need. The most important factor of all was that they nearly always found the quarry that we were hunting. In the process they taught me everything they knew about how to track animals, and how to interpret the spoor. My skills as a tracker, therefore, grew as my scores mounted.

Most of the hunting I did on this patrol was mundane. It is not worthy of further comment. In the evenings, when I went to bed tired but excited and sleepless, I lay and watched the stars crawling all over the night sky. It was then that I analysed each day's hunt. And I suddenly realized that I had reached the stage where I could actually say that some of my elephant hunts were *'mundane'*.

To the tyro, what I was doing would not have been considered mundane. But much of my hunting *had* become so *to me*. Then I thought, maybe *'routine'* would be a better word? The hunting of *any* elephant, to someone who has not hunted elephant before, will always be an exciting, adrenaline-pumping experience. But to me a great deal of what I was doing *was* becoming habitual.

Every day we tracked the elephants down. We tested the wind. We approached downwind and got into a position that exposed the elephant to a side-head brain-shot. I pumped a bullet into the animal's brain – and I fired more bullets into whatever other elephants presented me with comfortable shots. I followed the ones that ran away and, if I caught up with them, I repeated the process. Then the hunt was over. I had never, at this point in my

career, wounded an elephant that got away. When I did wound one – with a misplaced brain shot – I always managed to pull it down before it got out of sight; or I tracked it down and killed it before the end of the day.

In all the many thousands of elephants that I have hunted over the years, I have only ever wounded two animals that got away. Two in five thousand! That is not a bad record! Both those hunts are recorded in my book MAHOHBOH.

I *knew*, in my heart, I was becoming a very good elephant hunter.

I think Bruce Austen realized this, too, because he gave me elephant hunting opportunities all the time. I became Main Camp's elephant hunting *dog's body*. Within six months of my arrival at Main Camp, Bruce was sending me out on all sorts of big game hunting tasks and he never seemed to doubt that I could handle them.

I had expected that one of the groups of younger elephants I shot on that patrol would have had a go at me. I had by then worked out that younger bulls were much more inclined to challenge the hunter than the big bulls were. Most of these challenges were mock charges but that didn't matter. A mock-charging elephant still presented an opportunity for a frontal brain shot.

The very big bulls normally ran away – and they kept on running – at the first sign they were being pursued. I have walked miles and miles on the spoor of very big bulls, many times, and never caught up with them. They often just keep on going until the sun sets and darkness closes down the hunt.

I did get my chance to shoot an elephant with a frontal brain-shot on this patrol, but it was not a young bull that challenged me. It was one of single big bulls, an animal of immense proportions.

I knew the elephant we tracked that day was very big. The size of his footprints told me that. Ben, in particular, commented on the huge size of the spoor. Mbuyotsi had nodded his agreement.

We picked up his tracks next to the fence and we followed the elephant into the teak forest to the east. The wind was every-which-way that morning and he got our scent several times. Each time he ran away. Each time we followed him. We flushed him three times inside a two-hour period. On the third occasion I got the distinct *feeling* he was getting annoyed. I don't know what made me sense that. Maybe it was something in the tracking. Maybe it was something I had picked up unconsciously. Maybe it was something else.

The elephant took us many miles from the game fence that day. At one stage he walked right past a small Ndebele settlement called Korodziba. We

could see the village and the people walking about amongst the huts, from the spoor we were following.

"*Basop loh mcobidagga,*" Ben said to me after the last flushing. *Look out for this elephant*. He too had *felt* what I had felt. It was an uncanny feeling that brought fear to my soul. I had not experienced this kind of fear when hunting elephant for a very long time. Maybe I was fearful because I knew we were tracking a *very* big elephant bull.

We tracked on and I thought about what Ben had said. I had to smile. He had called the elephant *'mcobidagga'*. That was the Bushman's colloquial name for an elephant. The 'c' is pronounced with a soft clicking lisp. It means: *'The one who pummels mud'*.

I took Ben at his word. I prepared myself for a determined charge long before it happened. I took my rifle from my tracker. If we were expecting a charge I was going to be ready for it. An hour later it happened.

We had entered a part of the gusu where there were lots of tall teak trees and intermittent patches of particularly thick sinanga. The elephant had been moving at a fast pace ever since its last flushing. Not running but walking, purposefully, with very long strides. I was beginning to think he was on his way to the horizon and that we would now never catch up with him. I had followed this kind of spoor many times. It had always ended up with the animal outpacing us. Hunting very big elephant bulls can become very tiring and very frustrating!

Then, to our right front, there came the loud sound of a single dry stick snapping. We all stopped dead in our tracks. I slipped the safetycatch into the off position. Adrenaline began to pump. *This* was not going to be another mundane hunt. *This* was going to be something special. I could feel it in my bones. My hands began to quiver. The palms of my hands began to sweat. Fear gripped at my bowels.

That breaking stick could only mean one thing. The elephant we had been following was diagonally in front of us. It had heard us approaching and it had moved to face us. Its foot must have had stood, inadvertently, on a dead stick concealed in amongst the dry leaves beneath its feet.

This time the wily old bull had not run off. That fact told all three of us that he had been waiting for us to catch up. It told us, too, that *this time* the elephant was going to attack.

The elephant had chosen its ambush position well. We, the hunters, were

positioned in a patch of relatively open forest. The elephant was standing, to our right front, in some of the thickest sinanga I had seen that morning. I looked into the thick bush very carefully. There was no sign of our quarry.

Silence reigned. I could smell my fear. None of us moved.

My heart was pumping ten to the dozen. I had never before been charged down by an elephant. Seriously challenged? Yes! Many times! Serious challenges were normally conducted by pubertal or young adult bulls. Sometimes by cows! Most of the elephant attacks I had experienced were flimsy demonstrations. They had been blustering attempts to impress me: *'Look what a big boy am I!'* Even those that appeared, at first, to have been *really* determined attacks, in the end, watered down into mock charges.

I had *never* experienced a charge by an elephant that really meant business. Not yet. This time the animal confronting us was not a baby. It was not a pubertal *'teddy boy'*. It was not a young adult either. *This* elephant was a *very* big bull. I had a feeling this elephant was going to be the exception to the rule. This elephant was going to be the one I had been waiting for. This elephant was going to seriously charge me down.

I felt strangely apprehensive – very apprehensive. I wanted this to happen. But I didn't want it to happen. I was more than just apprehensive. I was afraid. Had I bitten off more than I could chew by hunting the huge bull so relentlessly all day long? I was suddenly no longer so confident that I could handle what I now knew was about to happen.

I suddenly developed a huge urge to turn and to run. I had not experienced this feeling for ages. At least, not with such intensity. I grabbed at my nerves and I pulled them in tight. I stood my ground.

Ben was standing within touching distance on my right hand side. Mbuyotsi was standing two paces behind me, slightly to my left hand side. Mbuyotsi had the 9.3 Mauser in his hands.

I looked at Ben. He looked at me. His eyes looked worried. His face was bland – serious and non-committal.

I twisted round, keeping my feet still, and I looked at Mbuyotsi. His face was without expression. I looked at the rifle in his hands. He had the safety catch fully off. The 9.3 was a pea-shooter compared to what we needed at that moment. I would have been much happier had I had a ship's cannon in my hands. I doubted that even my .375 Magnum was adequate.

I turned to the front and looked ahead. I listened intently.

The stand-off was vibrant. Not one of us doubted the elephant was

standing in the thick sinanga just in front of us. We all knew he, too, was standing still and listening. He had heard us. Of that there was no doubt. He had our position pegged. None of us doubted that either. He knew exactly where we were.

So why was he waiting? If he was going to attack, why did he not just charge us down? Maybe he was waiting until he could actually see us? Maybe…. All these kinds of thoughts rushed round and round inside my head. Nonsensical thoughts! They were ideas about things that didn't matter.

One minute passed. Nothing happened. Two minutes came and went. We had heard nothing more. I was beginning to doubt that we had heard an elephant at all. But, deep down inside me, I knew he was there. I knew he was standing still – that he was listening intently – like we were. He needed a cue, a signal, to set him off. But what would he do? Would he charge or would he again run away? It was anybody's guess.

Strangely, I prayed that *this* elephant would run away. I knew he was a *very* big bull. I also knew my .375 bullet did not pack enough punch to knock him down if I missed the brain. If he charged I would have to kill him or face consequences that were just too terrible to contemplate. I was surprisingly nervous of *this* elephant.

I don't know how long that impasse lasted. It was several minutes. I grew tired of the waiting. Fearful though I was, I needed to end the standoff. My nerves were running raw.

If you are going to come, I said to the elephant in my mind, *then come! Let's get it over with*.

Then I thought: *Maybe there is no elephant. Maybe there is another explanation for the breaking stick. Maybe it was a kudu or a baboon?*

These ideas gave me doubts. Maybe it really *wasn't* an elephant. And if it wasn't an elephant why were we waiting around? I made a gesture to Ben that we should move on. That we should take up the spoor again.

The tracker's face became immediately animated. He shook his head vigorously and he pointed to my feet, bidding me to keep them still amongst the dry leaves I was standing on. Ben *knew* the elephant was still there. And, in my heart, so did I. All the elephant was waiting for was confirmation of our *exact* position. The sound of a shuffling footstep would probably be the trigger that would get him going.

Nevertheless, the long wait caused the vibrancy in my body to dissipate. I was no less fearful but my hands stopped quivering. The rhythm of my

heartbeat settled down. All the same, my belly muscles and my diaphragm remained tight. My shallow breathing persisted.

The next episode, from start to finish, took less than ten seconds.

I heard the sound of dead leaves shuffling. It came from where we had suspected the elephant was standing. Another stick broke. Then another. Suddenly there was the sound of an elephant's big body pushing ever more urgently through the sinanga – of stiff sticks dragging across an elephant's thick hide. And the sound of the movement got faster and faster. The big bull elephant was coming directly towards us.

He had begun his attack!

Panic punched back into my system. A switch had been flicked. My heart was back in my mouth beating like a six-stamp hammer mill. My body began to quake. The hands on my rifle were alive, shivering madly. All over the nerve ends in my body were on fire. My imagination ran riot.

I stood my ground. I turned to face the elephant

The bushes, fifty yards away, began shaking in front of me. Inside them I saw a dark shape moving. It was coming towards me, gathering speed. Then I saw the elephant's ears. They were bouncing up and down above the high sinanga, in unison with the pounding of the big bull's front feet on the ground. Very quickly the features of its head and face took shape.

My eyes opened wide. This elephant was huge. His giant size was amazingly intimidating. I could not remember ever having seen an elephant quite so big.

He had his head up high. His two big tusks were thrust upwards and forwards. They glistened whitely in the sunlight. He was looking ahead, down his nose, for a visual contact. He knew where we were but he needed to actually see us to direct the final stage of his attack.

It was a most frightening moment.

I again grabbed at my shaking nerves, pulling them under strict mental control. The power of the brain is amazing under such circumstances.

The danger was upon me. The giant elephant was right on top of me. The waiting was past. My biggest ever *moment-of-truth* had arrived. In the next few moments the elephant was going to die… or I was going to die….

The instant that idea flashed through my head, my mind took command of my body. Gone was the rising panic. Gone was the quaking body. Suddenly, my hands were quiet and steady on my rifle. There was still a tingling sensation deep inside my gut but it had no effect on my actions or

confidence. I was back in control.

Calmly I lifted my rifle to my shoulder. It came up slowly – as I always remember things happening when real danger threatens. My recollection of what happened next was that everything was happening in *extreme* slow motion. Even the charge of the elephant slowed down. My eyes sought out the sights and placed them on the elephant's high face. I looked for the cheekbones and found them – easily – as the huge bull elephant drew ever closer.

The ditty I had concocted flashed into my mind: *The thickness of the cheekbone – above the cheekbone – at the back of the cheekbone.*

I could not see the ear holes but the lyrics of my silent chant now pegged their location exactly. My sights picked up the central line of the elephant's face, downwards from the top. That was middle-for-diddle between the ear holes.

The elephant closed the gap. It uttered not a sound. There was no trumpeting. No growling. Nothing! Just an aura of complete silence! Even the sound of its great body surging through the sinanga was inaudible to me. My mind was focused entirely on the elephant's visual presence. Every one of my senses that was not important during those closing moments of the elephant's almighty charge had disengaged.

This elephant was not trying to intimidate. *This* charge was no demonstration. The big bull had trimmed all its sails. Like I was doing, it was using only those of its faculties that were needed to do the job in hand. Its whole being was concentrating on the attack. It was coming at us full bore. Its ears were flat up against its shoulders. Its trunk was curled beneath its head.

As the big bull elephant closed with me it began to lower its head. I knew then it had me squarely in its sights. It was racing towards me like an express train. As its head dropped lower on the hinge of its neck, the position of its brain did not waver. I saw it clearly in my mind. Its size! Its shape! Everything! It remained firmly between the elephant's ear holes.

The elephant's giant head came right down to almost ground level as it prepared to smash into my puny body. My sights were on target. I pulled the trigger.

The tiny bullet hit the elephant fair and square in the face. It travelled directly back through the skull and smashed into the brain from the front.

Immediately following the bullet's impact, the toes of the elephant's

front feet dug deeply into the sand. Its huge body began to fall. But it did not stop coming. It had been running far too fast. Its dead body was now flying flat-out towards me. Its front feet and legs were pulled backwards by its toes-in-the-sand. They folded neatly under the elephant's chest.

The huge animal hit the sand of the forest floor chest first. Both its huge tusks smacked down together like skids on a sled. The momentum of its charge slid the huge carcass along the ground towards me. It came to rest just three paces in front of me, like a plane landing without its wheels.

My first conscious remembrance of the elephant's death concerned its big amber eyes. Even before it had hit the ground I had seen that its eyes were wide open and lifeless, already staring into eternity. At that point I knew the elephant was dead.

I stood very still and watched the elephant's forward-sliding body come to a stop. I knew then, positively, that the elephant *was* dead. It was only then that I fully comprehended that the danger was over.

My brain relaxed. When it did so my body began to shake.

I turned and looked at Ben, still standing stoically by my side. His eyes were staring wide open and fixed on the dead elephant lying right in front of us. The two brass shells in his hand were rattling as they touched each other repeatedly in his shaking hands.

Behind me I heard Mbuyotsi open the bolt of his rifle. I visualised him pushing the loose round back into the magazine. The bolt closed on an empty chamber. He too had stood his ground, ready to back me up to the very last.

This was my first serious elephant charge. It was a formidable experience. The size of the animal was immense. Its huge proportions had magnified the illusion of the danger. A charging buffalo may well be more dangerous – and I believe that it is – but the perception one is left with when you go through such an experience with a really giant elephant bull is just *'so much more'*.

I watched the body of the elephant quivering in front of me. Its back legs were trying to kick but they were impeded by the fact the carcass was lying on its brisket. Then, following a number of super spasmodic convulsions, the huge body tilted and it rolled over onto its side. Immediately the top back leg lifted and began kicking in the air. I heard the familiar liquid sounds of the hip joint articulating. That was the last indication I needed to know that the elephant was *really* dead.

Had you asked me at that point where my bullet had entered the

elephant's face, I could not have told you. It was the first time that I had actually shot *at an elephant's brain* – which I could 'see' all the while the elephant was charging me. But I had no idea at all just where, on the elephant's face, that bullet had hit.

When I lay in bed that night, conducting the day's hunt-post-mortem in my head, a huge feeling of elation and accomplishment washed over me. I had passed an important milestone. I had passed a test that I had set myself! I had moved beyond a giant barrier. For the very first time I now knew exactly where the brain lay hidden inside that giant head. I was thereafter never in any doubt where I should place my bullet no matter what the angle. From that day forward I never looked back. From that day onward I aimed 'at the brain', not at a point on the surface of the elephant's head. Life was never the same again.

* * *

Later that year the Sehumi game fence reached and passed Makona Pan. At Makona it changed direction. Coming down the Sehumi drainage it had followed a general southerly-to-south-westerly route following the winding depression. From Makona the fence progressed in a dead straight line – on a compass bearing – until it reached the Nata River. It stopped on the Nata at the point where the river flowed out of Rhodesia into Botswana.

Makona pan was located just inside the game reserve at the place where the boundary (and the fence-line) made a *'corner'* – which is how the pan got its name. That fact only became obvious when the fence had been constructed. Prior to that the park boundary had not been demarcated at all and Makona had just been *'a pan'* at the bottom end of the Sehumi.

The Sehumi depression didn't stop at Makona. All the way above Makona, to the railway line at Ngamo, the *fossil river had* cut across the ancient fossil Kahalari sand dune structures. In geological times it had 'broken through' at Ngamo and forced its way southward.

Directly below Makona, the Kalahari sand and the teak forest petered out. It was replaced with heavy clay soils and mopani woodland. The always dry sandy depression that had been the Sehumi, therefore, became a real stream below Makona, cutting through the clay soils. When it rained water flowed southwards in this stream, running towards Botswana. It was on this stream, about twenty miles south of Makona, that the big Limpande earth-walled dam had been constructed.

From Limpande the Sehumi stream meandered southwards. One of its

divergent streams fed into Zibanini Pan. And from Zibanini the stream entered the Nata River where it was swallowed up.

At this point in Africa, the earth is so flat, if there is a heavy rainstorm to the south all the rivers and the streams flow north. If the storm is to the north, the rivers flow south. The general trend of the Nata, however, is that it flowed to the south – into the giant Magadigadi Salt Pan that began fifty miles away downstream

Zibanini Pan rarely went dry. It supported not only a great number of wild animals during the dry season, therefore, but also the biggest of all the MaSili Bushman settlements. Zibanini was considered to be *'the home'* of the MaSili Bushmen. They lived here in a permanent settlement just across the border in Botswana and they were all registered Botswana citizens.

Makona Pan was something of a hub. Besides the track down the Sehumi to Makona, a road was constructed along the new game fence that went down to the Nata. The road ran on the outside of the fence. Then there was the Linkwasha track that came to Makona Pan, from Main Camp, via Madundumela and Sitcheche. Makona was about seventy miles by road from Main Camp. The Main Camp track went on beyond Makona to Lebuti – one of Hwange's three 'seeps'. At Lebuti there were permanent pole-and-dagga and thatched accommodations for a small game scout force. From Lebuti the track went on to Limpande and thence to Zibanini.

Due east of Makona, there was an almost straight, once-graded, track that ran into the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Land. It cut repeatedly through the contact edges of the Kalahari sand and the mopani clay soils which lay to the south. Ten miles from Makona, along this road, was the Bushman settlement of Salankomo. And ten miles beyond Salankomo there was a mixed Ndebele and Bushman settlement called Pelindaba.

Pelindaba means *'the end of the road'*. It was here that the Native Commissioner of the Tjolotjo district had established the last of his remote office outposts. He had what he called a *'camp'* (or sub-station) here, built of brick. It had all the mod-cons of a suburban house. The N.C.s really *'roughed it'* when they went camping! There was a daytime telephone link here, also, between Pelindaba and the N.C.'s headquarters at the Tjolotjo administration village, far away to the north.

South of the Salankomo-Pelindaba road lay a wedge of mopani woodland next to the fence. In those days it was uninhabited. South of the mopani lay the sidagas. The sidagas stretched right down and beyond the Nata River,

forty miles away. And south of the Nata was the Botswana border. During the rains, the water-logged sidaga soils make it impossible for anyone to use any kind of wheeled transport for six months of the year. Nobody, therefore, has ever lived permanently in this vacant hell-hole of Africa.

In other parts of southern Africa sidagas are called ‘black cotton soils’. Besides them being composed of heavy clay, these black cotton soils are characterized by being heavily impregnated with tiny round pebbles which are clearly visible all over.

During the rains the soils become saturated with water. They swell up and expand their dry season size. When the dry season comes back the hot sun bakes them dry again, causing long, often wide and always deep cracks to appear all over. A myriad of the tiny pebbles loosen when the soil dries out and they fall in their thousands down the *almost* bottomless cracks. There they lie until the next wet season when the soils swell up again. The expanding action of the wet soil pushes the pebbles from the bottom of the cracks towards the surface again. This is a continual process that happens every year. So these sidagas have earned themselves the reputation of being *‘self-churning soils’*.

A lot of this sidaga region comprises open, coarse-grassy, areas with short mopani scrub. In the very wet areas even the mopani scrub cannot survive. Then there are pockets of firmer soils – like islands in a sea of liquid mud – on which some mopani woodland occurs. One thing is constant. Nobody lives there. Even the elephants and buffaloes get out when the wet season arrives.

There are much better soils along the Nata River itself. Here there are some sporadic but very big riverine forest trees. Some of the Nata’s winter thorn trees (*Acacia albida*) are huge. And during the dry season there are two large hollows in the river bed that are never without water – the Bambadzi and Sehubu waterholes.

During the months May to October, the Bushmen of Salankomo and Pelindaba used to ‘lagisahed’ their cattle on the Nata. This meant they moved all their cattle down to Bambadzi and Sehubu because, during the dry season, there is an abundance of palatable grass along the river and in the surrounding areas. The grass is then thick and untouched because, throughout the wet season there are no large grazing animals in the sidagas to eat it. The permanent water on the Nata, of course, makes all this possible. In my days on the Nata (the early 1960s), at night, the cattle were protected inside large

thorn bomas (skerms) for lions, leopards and hyenas were then very plentiful.

Before the veterinary fence had been erected, large herds of buffalo, wildebeest, zebra and elephants, out of Hwange, used to frequent the Bambadzi and Sehubu waterholes during the dry season. But once the new game fence was up very few of these animals went down to the Nata. The Bushmen thereafter had the area all to themselves. There was, during the dry season, quite a lot of interaction between the MaSili Bushmen from Zibanini and those from Tjolotjo.

I did most of my elephant and external buffalo hunting in the teak forests of the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands in 1961 – closer to Ngamo than to Makona. But it was within a thirty-mile radius east, north-east and south-east of Makona Pan that I did a lot of my heavy elephant hunting in 1962 and 1963. Makona, Salankomo, Pelindaba and the big waterholes on the Nata, therefore, saw me quite frequently during the last two years of my stint at Hwange's Main Camp in the early 1960s.

NOTE TO READERS

Out of the thirty best elephant hunting stories contained in my book MAHOHBOH, seven of them happened in this Makona-zone during the years 1962 and 1963. As I am offering MAHOHBOH as a "companion book" to this six-book big game hunting memoir series, I shall not be repeating these seven stories in this book

PART TWO

Hwange National Park
1961 – 1963

THE FIRST manifestation of there being new monies available in the Federal Department of National Parks, was when all personnel were issued uniforms. This included both officer and native game scout staff alike. The next thing to happen was the initiation of infrastructural developments.

Throughout 1961, 1962 and 1963 new tourist developments were carried out at a fever pace, particularly in and around Main Camp. Several new staff houses were built. A new office block was designed and constructed. All twenty-four of the double-bedded tourist huts in the rest camp were stripped, plastered, painted and thatched. A huge restaurant was constructed in the rest camp, under thatch. The old tourist shop in the rest camp was demolished and replaced with a small but modern tourist supermarket. Four semi-detached

family lodges, under thatch, intruded into the old camping ground – which had to be expanded. And the two ablution blocks in the rest camp, and the one that served the camping ground, were stripped, revamped, modernised, and thatched.

Shumba Camp, halfway to Robin's Camp, was given a face-lift and re-thatched.

Other developments at Robin's saw the twelve tourist rest huts there, and the ablution block that served them, all given the same treatment that their counterparts had enjoyed at Main Camp.

The old sandy and winding tourist dirt road linking Main Camp to Shumba Camp was replaced with a properly constructed, two-lane, tarmac road. The main gravel road between Shumba and Robin's Camp was widened and totally reconstructed. These developments enabled vehicles to ply this arterial road throughout the year. By 1963 Main Camp was open for tourists twelve months of the year.

The most important tourist game viewing roads out of Main Camp were all reconstructed and gravelled. These included the very busy ten mile drive; the gravelled section of the 100 mile circular drive from Main Camp to Shumba and back (the gravelled section ran north of, and parallel, to the tarmac road); the three-mile long Nyamandhlovu pan loop road; and the eight mile section of road between Main Camp and Makwa Pan. All the tourist tracks in the Robin's area were properly reconstructed.

The several new bush tracks that Tim and I had reconnoitred on horse patrol during the first four months of 1961, and later opened up by hand with gangs of labourers, were all mechanically graded mid-1963. After that, one by one, the new boreholes were drilled and both windmills *and* Lister diesel engines were installed. By the end of 1963 the artificial game water supply situation in Hwange had increased to thirty boreholes, double what it had been when I first arrived at Main Camp in October 1960. After 1963 the game water supply development continued.

The task of maintaining double the number of boreholes – scattered as they were, often hundreds of miles apart and in some very remote parts of the game reserve – was far too much for Harry Cantle to handle on his own. The government Department of Water Affairs – that had drilled the boreholes and that had equipped them – therefore, created a new post at Hwange Main Camp. A Water Affairs official was posted to Main Camp with the sole responsibility of maintaining (and constantly expanding and upgrading) both

the game water supplies, *and* the domestic water supplies, throughout the national park.

The appointment of the Water Affairs officer released Harry from *all* responsibility for the maintenance of the park's pumps and engines. This gave him more time to carry out general game ranging work. I don't know if Harry liked this change, however, because he was so devoted to his game water supplies. But he certainly enjoyed, for the short time that it lasted, getting out into the field.

Harry was a *Jack of all trades*. Immediately the new Water Affairs official had been appointed Bruce snaffled Harry to help him carry out his now huge admin load. So poor Harry jumped from the frying pan into the fire!

A landing strip was constructed on the Main Camp vlei, big enough to take a DC 3 Dakota aircraft. This was the standard passenger aircraft flown by Central African Airways, the federation's airline, on its domestic routes

The first aircraft to use the Main Camp airstrip was a Dakota of the Royal Rhodesian Air Force. Shortly after that regular flights brought tourists directly into Main Camp – from Salisbury, Bulawayo, Victoria Falls and Kariba. This marked the beginning of a new era for Hwange National Park.

Outside the game reserve, the old tarmac strip road from Bulawayo to Victoria Falls was replaced with a modern twenty-two foot wide tarmac road. And the winding, sandy, old dirt track that had served as the game reserve's access road for decades – part of which was the Dett vlei dirt road – was replaced with a wide and properly gravelled road that fed directly off the new main Vic Falls-to-Bulawayo highway. This access road was later tarred.

Bruce Austen's workload increased hugely as all this development progressed. It became so heavy that it necessitated the appointment of an administrative officer. 'Old Man Thomas' took up the position. He was elderly, heavy and stooped. He seemed to shuffle from place to place. His spectacle lenses looked like the bottom ends of coca-cola bottles. But he was a Trojan. The old man quickly improved all the administrative systems and soon became indispensible to Malindela. He also quickly endeared himself to each and every member of staff on the Main Camp station.

The appointment of old man Thomas revolutionised administration throughout Hwange National Park. He relieved Bruce of a great deal of mundane bookwork and this increased the warden's work output considerably. It made him a happier man, too. Bruce treated the old man with

reverence and God help anyone who was rude to him. Old man Thomas, therefore, very quickly became an important institution at Main Camp.

There were changes in our field staff complement also. Mid-way through all this turmoil, Tim Braybrooke was transferred to Victoria Falls National Park. Perhaps his planned marriage to his sweetheart, Bridget – whom he affectionately called 'birdshit' – had something to do with his move.

Tim's departure left a big hole in my life and a big hole in Main Camp's general field-ranger staff, too. He had become something of a constant in my environment. I used him as a springboard, bouncing questions and ideas off him all the time. I considered Tim to be a close friend and I missed him greatly when he was gone. I don't think he ever really knew just *how* much of an influence he had been on my life. I took over his role as the grand-dragon of single quarters.

Tim's departure left me as the only single young game ranger at Main Camp who was available and competent enough to carry out the station's sometimes heavy big game hunting commitments.

I am not sure now just when it was that a new Water Affairs officer was appointed. If my memory serves me right it was towards the end of 1962. So, Harry's obligations to the game water supplies remained in force throughout 1961 and during most of 1962. Harry, working on administration duties under Bruce Austen's benevolent thumb, was able, nevertheless, to get out into the field every now and again. Even so, the ranger-staff situation remained *tight* throughout this three-year period.

Tim was replaced by John Stead, who had no big game hunting experience whatsoever. John, a young married man in his mid-twenties, moved into one of Main Camp's new staff houses.

I was then still a cadet game ranger because I had not yet attained the age of twenty-two. I was also still working on a reduced salary even though I had completed nearly two years of service. Nevertheless, Bruce tasked me with the job of training the new game ranger in the art and craft of elephant and buffalo hunting. John, a brand new and totally inexperienced game ranger, was technically my superior. And he had joined the department, because he was over twenty-two, on a game ranger's full salary.

Harry, of course, assisted with John Stead's training programme, too.

A year later, Main Camp's game ranger establishment was increased by one. Roland Venables, a single game ranger from Inyanga National Park, was

transferred to fill the post. He, too, had no big game hunting experience and he had to be trained also. But, by the time Roland came to Main Camp, I had passed the magical twenty-two years-of-age milestone. Roland took up residence in single quarters.

* * *

April 1961 came and went. Nobody attached any significance to it. For me, however, the month of April that year was a milestone of some importance. I had been transferred to Main Camp under a big dark cloud in October 1960. The serious altercation I had had with my previous Warden, John Hatton, in the Matopos National Park, had caused ructions in the department. I had been told that if *'I did not make good'* inside six months I was *'out'*.

Mid-April 1961 was six months after Mid-October 1960. My sixmonth period of probation was supposed to terminate mid-April!

Tim Braybrooke had been appointed my mentor in October. He led me carefully through all my developmental stages as a novice hunter and game ranger. In January 1961 I had shot my first elephant without him. Since then I had added to my experience considerably – hunting many elephants, buffaloes and lions on my own. I now felt comfortable hunting dangerous big game animals and my competence grew with every hunt. I was very proud of what I had achieved. But, throughout that six-month period I never forgot that I was still on probation. It was an ominous weight sitting on my shoulders.

During my very first conversation with Bruce Austen, the morning after my arrival at Main Camp, Malindela told me he wanted *"to have a serious talk with me."* We both knew it was about my altercation with John Hatton. But Bruce was constantly interrupted that morning with more pressing business. There were just too many *'bodies'* around for us to talk privately. When we all went off for breakfast after his early morning work briefing, Bruce had said to me: *"I want to have a talk with you after breakfast."*

After breakfast the urgency of the day's planned events again took precedence. *"Ron, you had better go along with Tim today,"* Bruce had said, changing his plans. *"He will show you the ropes. We'll have our chat later."*

That chat never happened. It was Tim who informed me about my probationary period. It was Tim who told me all the whys and the wherefores about it. It was Tim who was appointed my mentor and guardian angel. It was Tim who laid the station's disciplinary code upon me.

After October had come and gone I never heard another word about me being on probation. Nevertheless, I was all the time conscious of its presence.

I was, therefore, like a cat on a hot tin roof throughout the month of April 1961. I expected to be summonsed to Bruce Austen's office at any time. Nothing happened. Nobody seemed to have remembered that I had been on probation all this time. I was treated like just another member of staff. What we were going to do, this month, next month and the month after, was discussed openly and I was allocated my place in the planning programme. Nobody cared two hoots about the fact that the six-month period of my so-called probation had expired! I let sleeping dogs lie. I did not mention the word 'probation' to anybody. I did not want to open up a can of worms that seemed to have died a natural death. The end of my probationary period, therefore, came and went unnoticed. It was a nonevent.

* * *

Within the milieu of huge and frantic development at Main Camp I was tasked with many jobs of many different kinds. And now that I have explained the background to my life at Main Camp, I can proceed with telling the stories that marked the highlights of my life during this period.

As I have explained before, circumstances, as they unravelled, dictated that I became the primary owner of the task of shooting two buffalo bulls a week for labour rations. This I carried out principally in the teak forest – the gusu – adjacent to Dett village. Surprisingly, the number of buffaloes in that area, throughout those three long years, never declined. What we shot was replaced immediately. And every week my buffalo hunting experience increased in leaps and bounds.

I hasten to add that my buffalo hunting was, from 1961 onwards, all self-taught. Tim and I, together, had shot four buffalo bulls on the Dett vlei about a week after I arrived at Main Camp in October 1960. *That was* my only *'instructional'* hunt. Tim had killed two. I had killed two. A few weeks later I shot and killed a buffalo bull that was intent upon killing Tim in the teak forests of Ngamo. Other than those two hunts nobody ever taught me *how* to hunt buffaloes. My *shooting* of buffaloes, therefore, was all self-taught. It was my Bushman trackers who taught me how to *hunt* them.

Tim and I continued to hunt the buffaloes and the elephants that ventured out of the park into the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands. This we did separately whilst Tim was still stationed at Main Camp. Harry hunted here, too, but only

very occasionally. He took on the task only when it was of an urgent nature, and only when Tim or I were unable to attend. When Tim left Main Camp, the bulk of these hunting duties fell onto my shoulders.

There were always elephant crop-raiding and buffalo crop-raiding reports to address, too. These occurred mainly in the TTLs surrounding the park, during the crop ripening season (March and April). During the dry season, in the native villages, we sometimes had to shoot elephants when they took to raiding the grain-bin huts in which the harvested maize-cobs and sorghum seeds were stored. And on the commercial European-owned farms we shot elephants during the dry season when they pulled up the pipes of water installations, or raided irrigated crops. All these animals were bulls. I never once, throughout my whole life, ever attended to elephant or buffalo marauding reports carried out by females of either species.

The opportunities that I had to hunt elephants and buffaloes were virtually unlimited. They were only restricted by the limitations of time and the need for me to perform other more pressing duties. They were enhanced, however, by the fact that, upon Tim Braybrooke's departure from Main Camp, I was the only person left on station – young as I was – who had the time and the experience to carry out these hunting duties. I did so, of course, without complaint!

The same lack of instruction – as pertained to buffalo hunting – applied to my work attending to lion, leopard and hyena stock-killers. Both Tim and I reacted to stock-killing reports independently right from the time I was first posted to Main Camp. Not once did Tim, or anybody else, accompany me on a predator-control hunt. Nobody offered me *any* kind of direct guidance. My official training was zero. The only help and instruction I ever obtained came from my trackers, and Bruce clearly relied on the trackers to teach me properly.

Getting young game rangers to become independent hunters was a major priority. It made no sense for two officers to attend to one complaint when we were so short staffed. Tim shot several lions before he left us. After he left us, I attended to practically *all* the stock-killer complaints.

Harry shot a lion on one occasion. So did Tony Boyce (the game ranger at Robins Camp) when he was spending a few weeks with us at Main Camp. Tony came down to Main Camp every now and again to gain elephant hunting experience. There was, in those years, very little elephant hunting done out of Robins.

There were also horse patrols to perform. Between October 1960 and May 1961, I carried out three horse patrols. Tim did one. It was his last horse patrol in Hwange. During the wet season of 1962 I carried out three horse patrols. In 1963 I did two. John Stead and Roland Venables did horse patrols in between mine.

There were a variety of other *ad hoc* duties the young game rangers of Main Camp were required to perform. Escorting scientists, government officials and V.I.P.s happened irregularly. Some of these tasks were interesting, some very boring.

My life was packed with work. There was never a dull moment. I grabbed every opportunity to advance my experience and my capabilities as a game ranger with both hands. The highlights, of course, were the huge volumes of big game hunting experiences that I was able to accumulate. If I wasn't shooting lions, elephants and buffaloes in the Hwange and Tjolotjo TTLs, I was shooting them on the commercial cattle ranches to the north of the park. These were my maturing years. They were the years when I consolidated my ever-growing big game hunting experience. During this period, in my own eyes, I became a highly competent big game hunter.

* * *

I spent an awful lot of time in the Tribal Trust Lands of Tjolotjo – from Ngamo in the north to the Nata River in the south – hunting elephants and buffaloes. Most of the elephants were bulls. All the buffaloes were bulls. In those days those parts of the Tjolotjo TTL adjacent to Hwange National Park were largely uninhabited by man.

Right the way down the Sehumi, all along the new game fence, there were no native villages. There was a nest of villages *(a village-line)* at Ngamo where Headman Mazai was the local chieftain. Salankomo, ten miles to the east along the road from Makona Pan towards the Native Commissioner's *sub-office* at Pelindaba, was the next nearest human habitation to the game reserve boundary.

Halfway along the fence line between Ngamo and Makona, another long straight road, a bulldozed and always heavily overgrown sandy route, ran eastward into the teak forest. Ten miles along that vehicle track there was a single borehole that supported a very small enclave of Ndebele villages.

Other than these few settlements the whole vast area was devoid of people. Between Ngamo and Makona the gusu was pristine and the sinanga thick. There were then no cattle, sheep or goats here to open up the forest

understory.

East of the fence line, between Makona and the Nata, lay that enormous block of sidaga (cotton soil) and mopani. It was fifty miles long and thirty miles wide. There were no villages at all in this huge block of quagmire country. No large wild animals ventured far into this zone between the months of November and May. Neither did many human beings. Not even the people who lived in the village lines of Pelindaba and Salankomo.

On one of my horse patrols our caravan was walking slowly up the vehicle track from the Nata, when my horse's front legs suddenly plunged into the ground. And as old Turk struggled to regain his footing, his back feet foundered, too. The horse then subsided, still struggling and in panic, right down onto its belly. In just a few moments of time I found myself standing on the ground, astride my horse, with both my feet still in the stirrups.

I stepped off the horse, shaking my feet free from the stirrups. The horse was struggling. It whinnied in panic as it thrashed its feet about under the ground. The whites of its eyes shone wildly around its dark pupils as it looked up at me when I walked around it. I had never seen old Turk in such a panic. The veteran old horse normally took everything that happened to him in his stride.

I squatted down in front of Turk and tried to placate him. Nothing helped. He was in a fix and he well knew that. I stood up and looked down on him, wondering how the hell we were going to get him out of the mud. All around the ground was hard and firm. I knew immediately that all four of his feet had broken through the hard crust on the surface and that they were dangling in the black semolina pudding that lay beneath. Under the hard surface the horse's feet were paddling away in liquid mud.

The trackers had a plan. They had encountered a similar problem once before.

To extricate the horse, we had to take the packs off the mules, and the saddle and the bridle off the horse. The horse's bridle was replaced with a stout leather halter. The trackers then attached the ends of several strong buffalo-hide riems to the halter, and with the other ends attached to both the mules' pack saddles, we hauled the horse upwards and backwards out of the mud. The front legs were pulled free first. Then the mules dragged the horse, on its side, over the hard ground whereupon its back legs slid out of the mud quite easily.

That was the last time I tried to ride a horse through these sidagas during

the rains.

From June to October the dry sidaga track along the new game fence was negotiable by Land Rover. It was then possible to get down to the Nata, from Makona, quite easily. The track was rough but it was navigable with four-wheel drive.

The sidagas were truly no place to venture during the rains. I had now learnt this lesson the hard way.

After this adventure I was told that, several years before, a Native Commissioner from Tjolotjo had tried to drive on another seasonal bush track from Bambatsi to Pelindaba. He had been camping at the Bambatsi waterhole, on the Nata, when an early-season rainstorm had unexpectedly hit the area. He bogged down somewhere right in the middle of the cotton soil zone. There was no way he was able to extricate himself. So he had walked, ploughing through the slick wet black sidaga soil, to Pelindaba. After that more rains fell and, very soon, the man hadn't a clue where his Land Rover was located.

It was decided to leave the vehicle where it had bogged down – until the next dry season – because there really was no way that *anybody* could get it to a place where it could be driven back home. When the next dry season came along the Land Rover could not be found. So, to this day, that vehicle is lying somewhere in the middle of the sidaga mudflats. Some say that, in the middle of the rains, it must have sunk down deep beneath the surface of the mud.

For most of the year, the road along the fence was negotiable by Land Rover for a distance of about five miles below Makona. There was a wedge of mopani woodland there that was often used by elephants during the rains. It fanned eastwards and southwards from Makona Pan. I used this piece of road quite often, during the rains, when I was hunting elephants, but I never moved beyond the mopani woodland sector – neither did the elephants.

* * *

In the winter of 1961 the Native Commissioner at Tjolotjo asked for assistance to deal with some crop-raiding elephants at Salankomo. They had, besides eating vegetables in the village gardens, taken to pushing over grain-bin huts in the villages, to get at the harvested dry maize-cobs and stored sorghum seed-heads inside. The cold dry season was a strange time of year to attend to cropraiders but it turned out to be a valid call. The Bushmen at

Salankomo were growing vegetables next to their huts in gardens that they laboriously tended each day with bucketfuls of water drawn from the local borehole hand pump. The vegetables seemed to be the main attraction for there was elephant spoor in every garden that we visited. We were also shown several clay grain-bins, and the huts that protected them, that had been demolished by elephants.

When I got to Makona I was informed by my veterinary friend that a large number of elephants had broken through the newly constructed section of game fence just north of Makona. He said he thought they had moved into the wedge of mopani woodland to the south of the Makonato-Salankomo track. A group of big bulls had broken the fence right down, he told me, and a herd of cows and calves had wandered through the gap.

Signs of the elephants' presence were not hard to find. Their spoor was all along the newly bulldozed fence-line below Makona. It was also all along the completed fence above Makona. We also found tracks crisscrossing the road between Makona and Salankomo. There were elephant tracks everywhere. There was at least one big herd of cows and calves. There were several very big lone bulls. And there were some small groups of younger bulls.

It was in the gardens at Salankomo that I started my hunt. The task of getting rid of the village marauders was my obvious priority. The other elephants could wait. They weren't about to go anywhere in a hurry.

Before the hunt commenced I press-ganged the services of a local Bushman called Batan. He was well known in the district because he was the tracker that the Chief Justice, Sir Hugh Beadle, always used when he came here on his annual elephant hunting pilgrimages. In my opinion, Batan was a useless and worthless tracker but he and Sir Hugh got on well together and that must have meant something to his Lordship.

Over the years I got to know Hugh Beadle very well and I liked him immensely. But I disapproved strongly of his tracker Batan. Batan was always so full of himself because of his close association with the Chief Justice. On this occasion I used Batan for two reasons. Firstly my trackers needed him to carry the heavy josaks. Secondly, I wanted him to recover the ivory of any elephants that we shot. This was an important task because it would save me a great deal of trouble in the months ahead. It was also his job to lead the Bushman villagers of Salankomo to the carcasses of any elephants that we might kill.

Ben and Mbuyotsi took up the spoor of two big bulls. These were the crop-raiders that were the focus of the N.C.'s complaint.

We tracked them out of one village environ into another. And then another. In each place they hit the vegetable gardens hard. When they left the villages they moved into the teak forest to the north of the MakonaSalankomo road. Within the forest they immediately sought out a broad expanse of very heavy sinanga. Gusu grows very thick during the rains and it holds its leaves until at least the first frosts of winter, and the first frosts had not then yet come. So the bush wherein the elephants went to ground was very dense.

We set off at seven o'clock in the morning and we had found our elephants by nine. Their tracks were everywhere about. Yesterday'stoday's-and-tomorrow's spoor! It seemed these two bulls had been coming to this same place every day for the last week or so, to while away the daylight hours. They obviously did not want to venture too far from the ripening vegetables, or from the rich grain bins, because it was their obvious intention to return to the same villages every night.

Both elephants were quietly feeding in the heavy undergrowth. They were not feeding heavily, just nibbling here and there, and breaking off the odd branch. It was a breaking branch, a loud crack in the silent forest that told us where they were. Both of them were totally oblivious to our presence. They were so laid back I don't think they were concerned at all that they might have been followed.

I approached very close from a downwind position. The first elephant went down to a side-head brain-shot at twenty paces. Now thoroughly alert, the second elephant stood his ground. This was unusual behiour for a mature bull but I sensed this one was looking for trouble.

The second bull was alarmed but he was seemingly more angry than he was frightened. He gave no intimation that he was about to run away. His head was up high and his ears were spread and he cast his head from one side to the other, looking and listening for the man who had fired the shot. He, too, was only twenty yards from me.

I could see his cheekbones clearly so I knew exactly where his ear holes lay. I moved, purposefully, towards him, shuffling my feet. This gave him the focus that he wanted. He steadied himself and looked down his nose directly at me. *That* was what *I* wanted. I wanted a straight headon frontal brain-shot. I banged a bullet into his face. He collapsed onto his knees and rolled over.

His back leg immediately started kicking.

I had had, again, no trouble in finding the brain from the front.

When I examined the elephant's face I discovered that my bullet had entered his head from a place on his trunk about one foot below where the tusks stuck out at the lip. This amazed me because I had aimed *'at the brain'* not thinking at all about where my bullet would penetrate the animal's skin. I recalled, however, just how high the elephant had been holding his head when I had aimed and fired my shot. I began to understand, then, just how much I had accomplished – in such a short time – in defining my frontal brain shots. I also marvelled at the length of penetration the bullet had achieved. It renewed my faith in the penetration qualities of the .375 Magnum bullet.

The kill site was not far from the road, so we walked directly onto the track dragging a heavy stick behind us. Then we walked up the road back to Salankomo, to where we had left the Land Rover. There Batan told the villagers how to find the elephant carcasses. We then drove back to Makona with Batan still in tow. From Makona we turned into the bottom end of the Sehumi. We moved slowly along the newly constructed game fence, searching for spoor. It wasn't long before we discovered that morning's tracks of a breeding herd of about twenty elephants.

I looked at my watch. Twelve noon! There was still a lot of time left in the day.

The elephants had spent time inside the Sehumi during the night, meandering about, eating here and munching there. They had repeatedly tested the fence. It was clear they wanted to break through the barrier and get back into the game reserve. At one point, over a distance of about fifty yards, the mopani pole standards had been pushed and pulled all over the place but none of the high-tensile steel wires had broken. Finally, the herd had wandered back into the teak forest moving eastward.

We found them deep inside the gusu at three o'clock in the afternoon. They were split up into three small groups each of which was just coming out of its siesta.

There was obviously a cow in oestrus because, in one group, there was a big bull in attendance. He towered over even the biggest of the cows and he was testing out the preparedness of the cow that was in season. At a distance of thirty yards I could see the tip of his trunk fondling the lips of the cow's vagina, low down between her back legs. I could even see the dribbling of her urine, releasing her pheromones into the air.

I considered waiting to watch them coupling, not ever having seen elephants mating before. But, as I was contemplating that idea, a young cow with a small calf at foot wandered out of the sinanga on my left hand side. I had not seen these animals before their sudden appearance – and they were about to put a spanner in the works.

Besides wanting to watch the elephants mating, I had already decided that I was going to let the cow groups come together again, after their midday nap, before I started shooting. But that was not to be. The new arrival on the scene got my wind and she started to perform. She trumpeted shrilly and blew volumes of air out of her trunk. She did not know where we were but she had definitely scented us. Her trumpeting sounded the alarm.

"*Agh... Agh,*" Ben muttered under his breath, shaking his head.

The three groups of elephants responded immediately. Up went all the big cows' heads. Out came their ears. They cast their heads about, canvassing the forest all around, looking and listening for what had disturbed the now thoroughly excited young cow.

The big bull abandoned his foreplay and moved quietly off to one side.

The alerted cow came running towards us, following the scent she had picked up. She cast her head about, looking for a visual contact. She saw us and made a rush at me. I let her come and flattened her with a single bullet through the brain. The calf moved away from its mother the moment she collapsed. Then it ran up to her and stood agitatedly at the side of her carcass – ears spread, head up high. I punched a bullet into the calf's head, too.

Ben immediately handed me two fresh shells. I pressed them, one after the other, into the rifle's magazine.

Now the game was on.

The big bull ran off hurriedly through the group of cows it had been standing amongst. It passed close by the other two groups as well. In unison they all took off in the wake of the big bull. He had given them the lead. They followed.

Suddenly, I had no target to shoot at. I had had twenty-odd elephant visual just a moment before. The next second they were gone and I found myself standing in a heavy pall of dust. I could see the bushes shaking where the last of the cows had disappeared. I could hear the noise of breaking branches as they made good their escape. In front of me lay the carcass of a single dead cow, and that of a single dead calf.

I took off after the fleeing elephants. Ben ran along immediately behind

me. Behind him ran Mbuyotsi with the 9.3. And behind Mbuyotsi ran Batan, carrying the two heavy water bags.

It didn't take me long to catch up with the stragglers. I was fit in those days. I did not find it difficult *catching up* with, and *keeping up* with, a fleeing breeding herd of elephants. I could outrun them, too, run past them and get in front. The fastest a herd of cow elephants was prepared to run was the speed at which the youngest calf could keep up with its mother.

By comparison, nobody on this earth can keep up with a running bull. Bull elephants can easily outrun even the fastest and fittest human.

I looked for the big bull that had started the rout. There was no sign of him. He had left the cows behind and to their fate.

By the time I had caught up with the running cows only Mbuyotsi was still with me. He was loping along at my same pace watching the cows ahead. Ben and Batan were nowhere in sight.

The elephants slowed down to a fast walk. So did I. I kept them in sight, watching them carefully all the while. We had run this far with them I didn't want to spook them now by exposing ourselves unnecessarily.

I stopped briefly. I took out my ash bag and tested the wind. There was a soft breeze blowing. It was flowing towards the elephants, slightly to their right hand side. They were running with the wind! I increased my pace and veered off to the right. Mbuyotsi followed.

After a while we drew opposite the herd. It had slowed right down to a medium-paced walk. The bigger cows were now casting glances over their shoulders, first to the left then to the right. But they kept on going. I kept them visual, fifty yards away on our left hand side.

Presently the big matriarch stopped. She turned round to face her back trail. Her head was up and her ears were spread. The other big cows stopped, too. They all turned to look and to listen behind them. Their big heads, ears spread wide, looked like a squadron of galleons in a sea of green with their sails full blown in the wind. They cast their heads from side to side. They were all listening, looking, trying to detect signs of pursuit. All of a sudden the whole herd was standing still – absolutely silent. The abrupt hush, after the hustle and bustle of their flight, was eerie.

Mbuyotsi and I stopped, too. We both, also, stood perfectly still and we watched the elephants quietly. I took out my ash bag and tested the wind. It was now flowing in the direction we had been walking. There was now no chance the elephants would get our scent. I was a bit concerned, however,

that Ben and Batan – who I knew would be quietly walking along following the spoor – would spook the jumbos with *their* scent.

We will have to take this lot down before that happened, I thought.

We waited. There was no way we were going to get any closer to these elephants whilst they were standing still – whilst they were concentrating on trying to pick up the sounds and the scents of their pursuers. We had to wait until they moved off. We had no other choice. Only when the elephants moved would we be able to close the gap. We would not be able to mask the considerable sounds that we would make when we walked over the thick carpet of dead leaves on the forest floor, until the elephants were on the move and making an even louder noise than we were making.

Visibility was good. I could clearly see the elephants fifty yards away. I tried to count them. I could see four big cows and half a dozen half grown animals. The smaller ones were hidden by lower bushes. I guessed there would be another six calves and babies. Sixteen!

"*Zinghaki?"* I asked Mbuyotsi in a whisper.

The tracker looked at the herd, counting. "Fifteen," he answered.

"How many were there at the beginning – when we first saw them?" "Maybe twenty-five..."

Mbuyotsi raised his eyebrows questioningly. He knew what I was thinking.

There were teelephants missing! Somewhere in the forest ten elephants had slipped through our fingers. Damn! It was that bloody bull! He had caused the break-up. When he ran away like that he had given the cows and calves the lead. When he had run they had followed! Some were clearly still running with him.

This was the first time I had had this kind of experience. I did not forget it. The same thing was to happen again and again. Eventually I worked my mind through the problem and found the answer. If you wanted to eliminate a herd of cows and calves, and there were adult bulls present, you had to take out the bulls first. I was later to discover, also, that when the bulls dropped dead not only did you remove the leadership problem, the cows were provided with an anchor – the carcasses of the dead bulls! Once the bulls were down even the biggest of the cows were reluctant to move away from the bulls' dead bodies.

We waited and we watched. After a while, one after the other, the big cows dropped their heads and relaxed their stances. Their ears lay limp and unmoving, flat against their shoulders. They were still listening but their

acute state of alertness had subsided.

A few minutes later the matriarch uttered a low rumbling throat growl. It was soft and deep. It permeated through the forest all around. She turned and moved off into the forest in the direction of the herd's previous flight. One by one the others followed her. They walked slowly, their feet shuffling through the dried leaves, and they began feeding as they walked along.

I did not wait a moment longer. Careful not to make too much noise I walked quickly ahead of the moving elephants. Mbuyotsi was on my heels.

Ten minutes later I had selected my killing ground and I let the herd walk slowly right onto me. At ten yards range I quickly dropped the four big cows with four quick brain shots. Mbuyotsi, who had taken spare cartridges from my belt, now offered them to me two at a time. I reloaded and dropped the next biggest four, one after the other. I then took the 9.3 from Mbuyotsi and knocked down another five. Only some calves remained. I killed them, too, with shots fired from the 9.3.

The slaughter took less than a minute. When we counted them there were seventeen animals in the group.

Ben and Batan heard the shooting. They increased their pace and five minutes later they joined us. Mbuyotsi and I quenched our hot thirsts with great swallows of water from the josaks. Then we sat down on the carcasses and waited for Batan to sever the tails.

It had not been a hunt that I would have remembered had it not been for the presence of that one mature elephant bull – and what had happened after we shot that first cow and calf. It was the first of many lessons that I was to learn, about hunting elephant cows-and-calves when there were big bulls present; and about their respective behaviour patterns when under fire.

* * *

I had been back at Main Camp for just one day when Bruce shunted me off to Karna Block. This was the van Wyk family ranch in the Shangani River valley. It was one of the biggest land-holdings in the whole of western Matabeleland. The last time I had been to Karna Block was when Tim and I had shot a crop-raiding hippo there in early December. That had been six long months ago. This time my job was to deal with some stock-killing lions.

I had met some of the van Wyk family on the occasion of the hippo hunt but I did not know any of them well. I had been introduced to the old man – 'Oom' van Wyk – and his wife. I had met Andries, the younger son, who, at

that time, was probably in his middle thirties. Andries was in charge of the crops and the dairy cattle. On this occasion I also met the older son, Dawid, who was getting on for forty. I met Dawid's wife, Magriet, and their son, Cornelius – a small, blonde, tousle-haired youngster of about ten years old. Dawid was in charge of the beef cattle.

What the Main Camp staff liked about the van Wyks was that when they had lions or hyenas killing their cattle they immediately called on Main Camp for assistance. This was quite unlike a lot of other local farmers who tried to hunt all their stock-killers by themselves. Most of them were not very good hunters, and they were frightened of the animals they were hunting. So they taught their stock-killers all the tricks in the book before they called upon us to help them. And when we arrived they expected us to wave a magic wand and simply make their problem go away.

The van Wyks were different. They were not shy to call for help when they needed it – with one exception. Whenever they had a stockkilling leopard on the farm, they handled it themselves. They had three leopard gin traps on the farm and they had become expert in their use. Not one of us at Main Camp, therefore, ever attended to a stock-killing leopard complaint on Karna Block. One of another of the family dealt with the problem themselves, adequately.

So I went off to Karna Block in the government Land Rover and I took along with me both Ben and Mbuyotsi. I left early in the morning so I got to the ranch by about nine o'clock. Dawid was away doing something elsewhere on the property when I arrived at the lovely family homestead high up on the escarent rim. From the front verandah the view extended to the horizon – when you could see it in the winter haze.

It was Dawid's cattle the lions had been killing so, in Dawid's absence, the old man said he wanted to come along to show me where the lions had killed a beast just three days before. Andries drove the old man in their rattle-trap pick-up truck down the winding road of the escarpment to the valley floor below. We followed in our 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 *modus operandi* was 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 there to do."

I was to learn that the old man actually ran out of steam quite quickly.

It did not take us very long to reach the banks of the Shangani, a perennial river with big, deep pools of crystal-clear running water. There were shallow rapids separating each pool. The pools varied in size. The biggest ones were several hundred yards long and about a hundred yards wide. They were surrounded by sandbanks and reedbeds, and sometimes there were quite large pockets of riverine forest. In the early summer the steep river banks supported large colonies of carmine and white-fronted bee-eaters which were forever swirling around showing off their crimson and azure-blue plumage. The Shangani, on Karna Block, was a nature's paradise.

"We must have some tea before we do anything else," the Old Man determined. *"Andries, get the tea things out...."* Andries went about this task dutifully.

"Go and get some dead wood," I instructed the trackers. And off they went to do my bidding. It wasn't long before they were back with armfuls of dead, dry branches.

"Now get them to skoffel a bit with your shovel," the old man instructed me, showing me exactly where he wanted that done. There was dry grass all around on the river bank, trodden down by the feet of many cattle. *"They must clear some ground for the fire,"* the old man intoned – motioning towards my 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 instructed. He spoke to his grown son as though he were still a little boy. I was affronted. Andries was then already a mature man, taller than his father and twice the weight.

"I'll get the fire going," the old man said.

I hung around awaiting *my* next instructions. None came.

The old man squatted down and began arranging dry kindling above a small pile of burning grass that he had just lit with a match. I stood and watched him. As the flames rose, so he added more sticks to the fire.

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

"There's fresh-fresh lion tracks down at the river's edge," he told his

father excitedly. *"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. He put the kettle down on the ground and ran after his over-excited father.

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

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

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

In unison both the trackers stopped what they were doing. They listened to the monkey's loud and repetitive warning. It was ranting. It was incessant – almost a chant. The racket was coming from a position about two hundred yards away downstream.

Ben looked at me. There was a twinkle in his eye. He raised his right hand, forefinger extended. *"Isiliwaan"!* he said. *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. We also knew the 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 the cartridge belt from the seat of my Land Rover. I wrapped it around my middle and buckled it on. Ben handed me the Cogswell and Harrison. He produced two rounds of ammunition which I punched into the magazine. Two more followed, then another one. I pressed the bolt home on the last round and pushed it into the breech.

On this occasion I had *not* brought along a second rifle.

"Bulala loh mlilo," I instructed Mbuyotsi. *Kill the fire*. He ran over to Andries' kettle, picked it up, came back 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 all knew the monkey had seen the lions.

We took off down the vehicle track that ran along the top of the river bank. It led straight towards where the monkey was shouting.

The monkey, a single male – the big blue-balled leader of a small troop –

was sitting on one of the upper high branches of an *mkauzaan* tree. It was one of several huge ebonies that dominated the riverine forest at that point.

We saw the monkey from some distance off. He saw us, too. He looked at us for a moment then he looked away and ignored us. His whole focus was downwards and away from the forest rim. He barked hoarsely and continuously at whatever it was he was looking at.

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 up-stream what else could the monkey be shouting at?*

We ran along the track towards the clump of big evergreens. As we drew closer I told the trackers to slow down. Our 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 saw 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. 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 and closer.

Ahead of us now I made out the entrance to a donga on my left hand side. There were high, sheer, gray-soil banks on both sides where, over the years, a small stream had gouged away into the ground to create a deep and wide erosion gulley. On our side the donga wall had withered away into some small undulating hillocks on which grew grass and low bushes. On the far side the steep gray bank continued towards the river. Just before it got to the forest edge it petered out. Throughout the basin thus created, the grass had been cropped short, like a lawn, by the continuous grazing of the farm's cattle.

When I saw the lions they were totally pre-occupied. There were three of them, all young nomadic males which had, without doubt, been recently kicked out of their parental pride inside the national park. The one lion had a cow by the throat. One of its heavy paws was holding the beast still on the ground with a strong downward pressure. By the looks of it, the big cat was still striving to kill its prey. Its teeth were locked in a deadly grip across the cow's throat.

The other two lions were already ripping at different places on the animal's back legs. They were pulling off big chunks of flesh and swallowing

it down in huge gulps. From the way it was struggling, I knew the cow was not yet dead.

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

The monkey continued to barrack.

I crawled up behind a small mound within fifty yards of my quarry. The lions continued to wrestle with their prey. They were totally oblivious to my presence. Lying on the far side of the mound, and looking over the top, I was able to get a dead-rest position from which to fire.

They all seemed to be about the same size. So it didn't really matter which lion I shot first. The one that had the cow by the throat was a little more obscured. The two at the back were the easiest targets.

I picked the one that was the most exposed and slapped a bullet into his ribs behind the shoulder. He immediately reared up, making some bewildering sounds, half-roaring, half-wailing. He ran to one side, for about ten yards, on his two back legs. There he fell over. I ignored him.

The other two lions stood up and looked around. They were clearly alarmed. The cow began to wriggle about as it tried to get up. It hadn't a hope. Its back legs were by then almost half-eaten.

I smacked my second bullet into the lion nearest to me. Again it hit him just behind the shoulder. He careered backwards and fell over, struggling to get up. The third lion took off running along the track that fed up the far side of the basin. It quickly disappeared in the bush on top of the donga wall. I had had no chance to put a sure bullet into him before he disappeared.

I had decided very early on in my career that I was not going to fire a shot at a lion unless I was confident the bullet would kill it. I had the greatest of respect for lions.

I knew that if I took too many chances with them they would wreak their revenge on me sooner or later. I was also always conscious of the fact a lion can disappear behind the flimsiest of cover. It was, therefore, not a good idea to wound a lion. If you wanted to live to a ripe old age, you did not take snap shots at lions.

I took off after the third lion, running right past the two stricken cats. They were both dying but not yet dead. I watched them very carefully as I ran past. They were both struggling to stay alive and they were well beyond the stage where they would attack me. Looking at the vacancy in their eyes, I

knew they were already well on their way out of this world.

I ran along the vehicle track, up the steep slope, to the top. Mbuyotsi and Ben followed, Ben lagging a bit behind.

The trackers caught up with me at the top of the steep hill. We found ourselves standing in the middle of some very heavy sinanga-like thicket. It was mainly dry and leafless sicklebush. The three of us wandered quietly through it, keeping to the track. Mbuyotsi and I watched for any and all signs of movement, or a direct sighting of the lion. Ben looked for spoor. The vehicle track emerged onto the edge of a wide-open mopani woodland.

If I was this lion, I thought, *I would not venture out into open woodland.*

So... Which way now? Should I follow the thicket upwards and away from the river – to the left? Or should I go to the right, down into the riverine forest, and into the riverine thickets, that lay below.

Ben had been unable to find any tracks that could tell us where the lion had gone. There was no time for deliberate tracking. I knew the lion was lying up somewhere nearby. I mustn't give him time to think – time to decide to move on. Push... push... push. That is what I had to do now.

I tested the wind. The air was drifting towards the river. As I contemplated my options, I pulled two rounds from my belt and opened the bolt, taking the extracted cartridge off its head. I fed the two new rounds into the magazine, pushing the cartridge in my hand on top of them. I held the top round in place with my thumb and slowly pushed the bolt home. The bolt pressed the top cartridge gently into the breech. It made minimum noise. My rifle was now, once again, full.

I looked at Mbuyotsi and I flicked my thumb to the left. The gesture was a question. He nodded.

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

I picked my way along the edge of the thicket, pushing my nose into the wind. I placed every foot carefully and quietly onto the ground. My eyes canvassed the bush everywhere inside the thicket which was on my left. Open woodland lay on my right. Visually, I probed every piece of thick bush, penetrating every nook and cranny that could possible hide a lion. Despite being very careful I nearly missed him.

I had ventured perhaps a hundred-and-fifty yards along the edge of the thicket, and had walked right passed the lion, before I saw him. I saw him directly over my left shoulder just before I was about to cast my eyes ahead

and discard the bush behind.

He was lying flat on the ground amongst the ubiquitous dry yellow grass. Except for the fact that his two wide-open golden-coloured eyes were staring at me openly – their symmetry having caught my eye – I would have missed him. He was, looking directly at me and lying flat on the ground as quiet as a mouse.

I don't think he would have attacked me. He wasn't lying in ambush. He was afraid and bewildered. I think that, had I not seen him, he would have held his position until I had passed him by. He would probably have then slinked off, moving silently towards the river, leaving me in blissful ignorance as to where he had gone.

Our eyes locked – his onto mine and mine onto his.

I stopped and quietly turned to face him, lifting my rifle as I moved – flicking the Mauser safety catch off with a single right thumb action. He was no more than twenty yards from me and I had him in clear view.

He knew I had seen him. I understood this because I saw him gather his feet beneath him like a cat does before it pounces on a mouse. Even then I did not believe he was about to charge. He was preparing himself for an escape should that become necessary. I was sure he had zero experience at being hunted. I was sure, also, that he was wondering just what the hell was going on? I had the measure of him. He was not about to rush me, neither was he quite ready to run off into the thick bush behind him. He was half-curious, half-afraid. He didn't see me as a threat. He wasn't sure just what he wanted to do.

I took careful aim at the lion's head, resting my foresight at a point on his nose just below his 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 take my finger off the trigger. The trigger was already at the point of no return. The shot went off. Instead of hitting the lion between the eyes, my bullet hit him low down in the stomach.

The lion tumbled backwards and 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. Even before I had jacked another round into the breech there was nothing for me to shoot at.

I took off after the rampaging lion, ducking and diving through the heavy sicklebush. I raced as fast as I could go, following the continuous

caterwauling of the injured cat. The spiky thorns raked over my exposed face and arms and legs. Blood flowed. I ignored it. The thorns tore at my uniform, ripping the epaulette buttons off the shoulders of my shirt. My green shoulder insignia flags flew off God knows where. I didn't care. I had other things on my mind. More important things!

So long as the lion continued to bellow 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 comes to a stop.*

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 lion and its chuntering roars. I did not even think the lion was headed for the donga cliff. I don't think the lion thought about that fact either.

First the lion, then I, were headed for the same disaster.

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

> *Pampas grass is an ornamental and exotic grass from South America. It was grown in the garden of the van Wyk home high up on the plateau. A seed from this grass must have strayed from the garden, run down the stream and the donga in storm water, and germinated here on the banks of the Shangani River five miles below the homestead.*

I was running hard when the thicket ended abruptly in front of me. Too late, I recognised the edge of the donga wall as it passed by beneath me. I, too, tried to grab at things that just were not 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 of the same high tussock of pampas grass. I hit the ground awkwardly twisting my left knee badly. Somehow, I managed to hang on to the rifle. I scrambled frantically to get into a position directly behind the tuft of grass.

As my body impacted with the ground, the lion leapt onto the grass, roaring like a banshee. That grass tussock was now the only thing that separated us on the donga floor. For a second or two, the whole top canopy of the grass leant over me. Then it fell back into its previous position.

The lion had backed off. But it continued to snarl and to growl at me all the time. It did not, however, run away. The distance between us was a mere three yards but we could not see each other. Every now and again I saw the tip of its swishing tail as it swung outwards from behind the tussock.

I scrambled backwards and away from the grass, retreating just one yard. I then realised that if I went too far back I would lose the cover that the grass provided. So I lay still and I watched the grass. And I watched the edges of the tuft just in case the lion came racing round from the back.

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

Something made me look down at the rifle in my hands. Something had caught my eye. 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 safety catch key was standing erect. It was in the half-off position. I flicked it fully off with my thumb. The rifle was again ready to fire.

The metallic clicking of the rifle's bolt action alerted the big cat. With a loud roar it again attacked the pampas grass from the far side. Again the grass leant over me. Again it retreated. And the lion contented itself, again, with snarling and growling at me from behind the grass.

I was tempted to fire a shot through the grass but I resisted the urge. I realised that had I done so, and missed the lion, it might then be itself tempted to attack me from around the edge of the tuft. If the lion came round the grass and have a good go at me, its speed would be like lightning. I would only have a chance to pull off one shot. It would have to be a good shot. I could not afford to be caught with an empty rifle in my hands.

So, instead of firing a shot, I lay still and I waited. My eyes remained focussed on the grass. At the same time I was aware that all around me the natural grass sward had been cropped short, like a lawn, by grazing cattle. The only cover I had was that tuft of pampas grass. It was also the only cover the lion had, too.

The lion stayed behind the grass. It continued to growl and to snarl at me, but it made no move to come round the tussock. I wondered about that. My bullet must have done more damage than I thought. Was the lion not moving, perhaps, because it could not move? That couldn't be it. It had already seriously attacked the pampas grass twice. Perhaps it was not forcing a confrontation because it was in pain or because it was afraid? That was more

like it. Perhaps its strength was leaching away and it would soon expire. I hoped that was the case. But I had no way of knowing what was really happening.

The impasse remained. The lion lay on the one side of the pampas grass, growling and snarling at me continuously. I lay on the other side of the grass on my back, with my shoulders raised and with my rifle poking in the direction of the lion. It was a tiring position that I couldn't 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 run away. It went berserk – roaring and growling, snarling and hissing, at the intruding trackers.

"Haaaiiieee..." I urged the trackers. *"Haaaaiiieee-konah..." No, No... "Hamba moovah... fishlah..." Go back. Hide away. "Tulah." Keep quiet.*

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

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

As regards my own nerves at this time, they were settling down. I knew I was still in trouble but my initial fear had subsided. I believed that as long as I had a bullet up the spout I could kill this lion if it attacked me. A .375 Magnum bullet hitting its chest from the front, and raking back though the entire length of its body, would drop *any* attacking lion in its tracks. All I had to do was to lie still and to wait out the time it would take for our circumstances to change. If it charged I was ready for it. But I had a feeling the lion's life was slowly expiring. Why else had it not run away?

Then, out of the blue, Andries appeared on the donga wall above me and on 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 above.

The lion got up and staggered to one side of the grass.... moaning softly to itself. It rolled over and over as it tried to regain its feet. It was now free of the grass tuft and I saw it was dying. Andries fired a second shot into it, just

to make sure.

I lay still and I watched the lion's life leave its 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 were yawning, without coordination. It tail was slapping softly against the ground. Then it died.

When I tried to get up I knew I had a problem. My knee was on fire. It wouldn't carry my weight.

This was the start of a knee-cartilage problem that eventually ended with me having an operation. But all that was yet to come.

* * *

I returned to Karna Block several times during my first three years at Main Camp. If it wasn't stock-killing lion I was attending to it was stockkilling hyenas. Hyenas had the terrible habit of ripping the udders off the cows. The cows then wandered about the giant-sized paddocks for days and days on end before they died.

Most of the time I used poison to kill hyenas. Poison seemed to work best for me with hyenas. But I also trapped them in gins. And I was sometimes successful with gun traps.

On my very last visit to Karna Block as a young game ranger, in November 1963, I set gin traps, and gun traps, and I laid many poisoned baits, for a single hyena that was wreaking havoc amongst the cattle. I eventually killed it in a gun trap on the banks of the Shangani – using the van Wyk family's old .303 as my weapon. We had set so many gun traps on that occasion that I used any and every firearm the van Wyks could give me.

The operation to catch that hyena had all sorts of repercussions. Firstly Dawid had to remove all his cattle from the paddocks along the river – where most of the attacks had taken place. It was not possible to lay gin traps and gun traps where there were cattle wandering about. The cattle were moved into paddocks on the high sandy escarpment, in mixed gusu-miombo woodland. All the native staff on the ranch were forbidden to enter the river paddocks, too.

I shot several kudu and impala to provide immediate baits for the hyena because, on a previous occasion, when we had tried to get what was probably this same hyena, it had simply moved up onto the plateau to where the cattle had been relocated. And there it killed again.

This time I set gun traps to traverse whatever extensive flat land we could find near the river. The tripwires extended, in some cases, for more than a hundred yards. And we littered pieces of game carcass on either side of the wires. The first night we shot one impala and one duiker in the gun traps. They were co-lateral damage in our war. That hyena was a very expensive stock-killer in many ways. We used the carcass of the impala and the duiker as yet more bait.

I camped in the big hay-and-lucerne shed up at the homestead. Every morning we went down early to check the gin traps and the gun traps, and to cover the baits with leafy branches during the day. If we were not to kill hundreds of vultures and eagles it was essential that we covered the baits – all the baits – but especially the poisoned baits – during the hours of daylight. It was a hell of a job because we had laid out so many.

One night we shot a bushpig in one of the gun traps. I remember the bushpig very especially. I laced the carcass with strychnine and secreted it under dead mlala palm leaves inside a small palm thicket next to the river. It didn't matter how well you hid a carcass, if the hyena was hungry it would find it and eat it.

The day after we killed the bushpig we went on our rounds and found the hyena dead, lying next to one of the gun trap tripwires. It had been shot with a .303 bullet just behind the shoulder. A perfect shot.

Once Dawid and his father had declared their satisfaction – that the job was done – I set about dismantling the traps and collecting the poisoned baits together for incineration. Both Dawid and Andries helped. The farm tractor brought in trailer after trailer of dry mopani wood to burn the poisoned meat. The big roast began....

I got a telephone message from Bruce Austen that morning. He needed me back at Main Camp as soon as possible. Dawid assured me that he would attend to the burning of the poisoned baits. I told him, particularly, about the bushpig carcass with the strychnine – the one that was hidden under dead mlala palm fronds down by the river. I also told Dawid the name of his native labourer who had helped me poison and lay that bait. Not to worry, Dawid said, he would make sure the bushpig was brought in for cremation.

I then packed up my camping katoonda and I left Karna Block for Main Camp.

Two years later I was in casual conversion with Inspector Jack Parker at Binga. Jack was then the Member-in-charge of the Binga BSA Police station

– having been transferred, on promotion, from Dett. The subject of our conversation was about poisoned predator baits. I was busy preparing poisoned baits for use on hyenas in Binga at the time, again using strychnine. As I plied my trade he watched me carefully. I told him just how important it was to properly dispose of poisoned baits after the predator-control exercise was complete. My biggest concern, I said, was for the safety of vultures and eagles. He agreed with me.

Then Jack told me a disturbing story out of Lupane.

A couple of years ago, Jack told me, a whole host of native people in the Lupane district had ended up in hospital with serious strychnine poisoning. Apparently a farm labourer had stolen a bushpig carcass from his employer.

The carcass had been fresh and recently laced with poison by the farmer. The thief had known this. So when he got the bushpig carcass to Lupane, the man had used the strong water jet of a garden hosepipe to flush out the poison from all the poison-inoculating cuts that the farmer had made in the flesh. The thief had then cut the wounds fully open and he had heavily doused water all over the more greatly exposed meat. Finally, when he was satisfied that the poison had all been washed out of the meat, he had benghisa-ed the carcass – smoke-drying and cooking the flesh on racks over a smoky wood fire. He had then sold the meat, in small pieces, to whoever he could get to buy it.

> *Once a poison – like strychnine – has been introduced to the meat of an animal carcass, no amount of washing will render the meat free of the poison. It permeates everywhere. Strychnine remains deadly until it has been incinerated. In this case, the water would merely have diluted the poison but the meat would have remained highly toxic. I consider myself very lucky that nobody died as a result of this native man's stupid actions.*

As I listened to Jack talking I suddenly went cold. *"When did that happen?"* I asked innocently.

"Let me think," Jack said, looking skyward for inspiration. *"It was towards the end of... let me see... the year before last. Yes. 1963... And it must have been round about October or November 1963."* It was the exact time I had been hunting that hyena on Karna Block! *"So you are right,"* he continued. *"You've got to be very careful about disposing of poisoned baits when you have finished with them."*

Karna Block was not too far from Lupane. The coincidence was just too great. It must have been my bushpig.

"Who was the farmer?" I asked – again innocently.

"I think the bushpig came from Karna Block," Jack said pretty sure of his facts now. *"It was stolen from one of the van Wyks... I think it was Dawid who testified in court."* He looked at me then. *"You know Dawid?*
Dawid van Wyk?"

"Yes I know him," I answered. *"I know him well."*

It was my bushpig! *"Did anybody die?"*

"Not that I can remember," Jack said matter-of-factly. *"But there were lots of people who were pretty damn sick."* I changed the subject at that point and let the matter rest.

I never again relied on *anybody* to dispose of my poisoned baits!

* * *

Thinking nearly fifty years back now, it is not always easy to remember exact facts. But I distinctly remember an incident that happened on Karna block when I was doing something or other on the farm during this period. I think I had gone there to hunt stock-killing lions. I seemed to be always there shooting stock-killing lions! I was again camped with Ben and Mbuyotsi in the big hay-and-lucerne shed near the homestead. I used the ablution facilities in the house and, by then, I was having supper with the family every night.

The trackers used the garden tap to wash their bodies and they cooked their own meal over an open fire alongside the big shed.

One night we came back late from whatever it was we were doing. I dropped off the trackers at the shed and made my way to the homestead. When I got into the house I discovered that the old man had had an accident. It had only just happened and the old man's elderly wife and Dawid's wife, Magriet, were attending to him.

Unbeknown to me at the time, a leopard had been irregularly visiting the sheep pens at night and gin traps had been laid to catch it. The sheep pens were not far from the homestead. The leopard had not yet killed anything but a killing was definitely going to happen. It was only a matter of time. So before any losses occurred, Dawid and Andries set all three of their gin traps on the main pathways all around the sheep pens.

Every morning they got up early to set the traps off – so they were harmless during the day. And every evening, just before dusk, they set them again.

That evening the two men had set the traps early and had gone off, together, to attend a farmer's meeting at the Gwaai River Hotel.

In the two men's absence the leopard had come to the sheep pens just on dusk and it had been caught in one of the traps. The leopard was, at first, left in the trap to await Dawid's and Andries' return. Everyone in the house heard the leopard's initial roaring calls and, for a time, they continued to hear the chain-links rattling. The cat didn't go very far before the drag log hooked onto a bush and became anchored.

After a while the old man got impatient. He decided it was time to dispatch the trapped leopard. He was not prepared to wait for either of his sons to return. So, with his .303 SMLE in his hand, and a hunting torch strapped to his forehead, he went out to do battle with the leopard.

What the old man had chosen to do was not a difficult task. It was well within his capacity and he had done the same thing in his past many times. So there was nothing extraordinary about what he had elected to do. The only problem with his whole plan was that he had no idea where the other two still-set gin traps were located – and he stepped onto one of them.

This is the one and only time I have ever heard of anyone actually getting caught in a gin trap. Everyone who works with gin traps talks about the possibility of stepping onto his own traps, but this is the *only* time I have ever heard that it actually happened.

Old man van Wyk was lucky. He had been wearing heavy leather boots with calf-high uppers. And the trap was small. It was big enough to catch a leopard, but not nearly as big as the traps I used to catch lions. The jaws had shut tight over the old man's foot and clamped around his ankle bones. The angle of his foot and boots in the device was alarming.

When I got to the house I immediately offered my assistance. The old man was lying on his big double bed in the main bedroom. The trap was still firmly clamped about his foot. He was in a lot of pain. But from what I could see, no bones had been broken. Maybe in his lower foot...? But the ankle bone was not broken.

He was a hard and tough old bugger and he did not complain. All he kept telling me was that: *"You must just get the trap off my foot"*.

I ran out to the back of the house and shouted for my trackers. Ben and Mbuyotsi came running. They followed me into the house. Together we tried to depress the trap's springs with our hands. It was an impossible task.

The only way we were going to get the jaws open was by *standing* on the leaf springs, one man on each spring, both springs at the same time.

"You are going to have to get onto your feet," I told the old man. He immediately understood why. He swung his legs off the bed, dragging the chain off the bed with the trap. He placed the trap firmly on the floor. Mbuyotsi stood on the one leaf spring. I stood on the other. The springs depressed and the jaws loosened, but they did not fall open.

"Pull the jaws open," I instructed Ben quietly. He leant down and pulled at the metal jaws. Some of the stubby teeth were imbedded in the leather of the old man's boot 'uppers' but, when the teeth were pulled free of the leather, the jaws opened all by themselves.

"Wheeeew," the old man said happily as he lifted his foot out of the device. *"Man,"* he exclaimed in relief holding my shoulder tight between his fingers, *"Baaie dankie. Baaie, baaie dankie." Thank you very much. Thank you very, very much.*

This was the first time I had heard Afrikaaans spoken in the house. I thought the van Wyk's had been long ago completely anglicized. The old man sat down on the bed and began to undo the laces of the boot on his injured foot.

"Nee," I said in Afrikaans. *"Jy moet net op die bed lê. Ek sal jou skoene aftrek." You just lie on the bed. I will take your boots off.*

"Ooooe" The old man said then, a broad smile across his face. *"Dis mooi. Jy kan die taal praat?" That's nice. You can speak the language.* I knew then he was going to be all right.

I took the old man's boots off carefully. There was no blood but lots of contusion. I suspected there was an awful lot of bruising still to come. I looked at Magriet and said: *"You want to take over now?"* She was crying quietly with relief. She nodded and I stepped back.

"He'll be all right now," I said to her gently as I backed off.

"Bly goed," I said to the old man as I prepared myself to leave the room. *Stay well!* I squeezed his shoulder gently.

I lifted the ugly steel trap and its chain off the bedroom floor, and I put it on the kitchen table before leaving the house by the back door.

"Come" I said to the trackers. *"Let's go get the leopard"*.

Conscious of the existence of at least one more set gin trap in the vicinity of the sheep pens I took a circuitous route through the trees. It was a dark

night and the leopard's eyes shone brightly in the torch-light. The trapped cat was, therefore, not difficult to find. I approached quite close and put a bullet through its head.

The old man recovered and he was back to his old self in next to no time. But, for several weeks he went through a torrid time as his foot slowly healed.

* * *

The next morning, on my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth, I passed young Cornelius' open bedroom door. The doorway fed into a wide central passage that ran through middle of the bedroom wing of the house.

Cornelius was still in bed, already wearing his thick-lensed glasses. It seemed he was unable to do anything without them. *"Hi Ron,"* he said as he saw me passing by. I waved at him... then stopped dead. Something had caught my eye. I stepped back and looked back into the bedroom. I hadn't been mistaken.

The bed was one of those old jobs that had heavy brass bars at the head and the foot. From a plain wire hook on the top-corner of the brass bars at the head of the bed, there hung a large galvanised funnel of the type you use for pouring oil into a tractor's engine. A one-inch rubber garden hosepipe was fastened to the spout underneath. It was fixed in place by a plumber's metal screw clamp. I wondered what the hell that contraption was for.

Bending down, I traced the hosepipe down its full length away from the funnel. It ran under Cornelius' bed to a wall vent just above the floor. The rubber hose had been pushed through a hole in the air vent and into the garden beyond.

Then I understood. The little tyke used the gadget for urinating in the night. He peed into the funnel and the urine ran through the hosepipe out into the garden. It saved him getting up from his warm bed in the middle of a cold winter's night.

I smiled and shook my head. I was to remember that device when I saw Cornelius twenty years later. He was then a huge man with no eyesight problem at all. He then sported a great fuzzy beard. I was told he had served as a Selous Scout, one of Rhodesia's elite fighting units, during the Rhodesian Bush War. But the time of our next meeting was yet to come!

I carried on down the passage and brushed my teeth.

* * *

I was called on another occasion to Karna Block. This time it was in answer to a stock-killing lion problem. A single lion had been living on the watersheds of both the Gwaai and Shangani rivers for some weeks, killing up to two head of cattle a week. When it pitched up on Karna Block, Dawid had moved the cattle up from the river onto the high plateau, and into paddocks in the woodlands close to the homestead. The lion had then moved onto the plateau where he continued his killing spree.

Of necessity, the cattle were then confined at night to guarded cattle kraals in the corners of the paddocks. Two native men manned a hut next to each of the kraals. They were armed with shotguns loaded with SSG.

A new and large cattle kraal was constructed near the homestead – squashed between the house and the open hay-and-lucerne shed in which I, again, camped that night. It was fenced with quarter-inch-thick strands of mining-hoist cable on three sides. The side next to the house was different. It was fenced with ten strands of ordinary barbed wire.

Dawid's prize breeding cows were amongst the cattle that were kept in this special homestead kraal. Their new calves were kraaled together with their mothers.

The lion had taken to visiting this kraal at night, too, but had so far been unsuccessful in its attempts to get the cattle to break out of their enclosure.

I arrived at the homestead about ten o'clock in the morning and was immediately set upon by Old Man van Wyk. He had a plan, he told me. We would get the lion together. *"How?"* I asked him politely.

"We will tether a young calf right next to the cable wall of the house kraal," he told me like a mischievous schoolboy, *"and we will set a triangle of trap guns around it. When the lion comes in the middle of the night, it won't matter which way it approaches the calf because one or another of the trap guns will get it."*

Dawid was standing to one side listening. I looked at Dawid and raised my eyebrows. I wanted to know what he thought of his father's idea. He smirked, smiled, raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned and walked away. That was how much he thought of his father's plan... but he also knew I would be required to put it into action. He clearly wanted none of it.

The old man nodded and smiled. He had caught and understood our silent communication. Undaunted, he went into the house and came back with his old .303 SMLE, a single-barrelled twelve gauge shotgun; and an old

Martini-Henry that still worked. I hadn't seen a Martini-Henry that worked since I had had my own Martini-Henry at school.

I spent the whole day hammering fence-standards into the ground as supports for the rifles and in tying the weapons to them. The trackers spent hours unwinding thin copper wire from the discarded armature of a motorcar's old generator. By that evening we had constructed the traps and had set the tripwires. A three-month old calf was tethered to a stake in the ground right in the middle of the triangle of trip wires. All we needed to do now was to arm the weapons. I waited until after supper to do that. It was the last thing I did before going to bed.

That night the trackers and I built a wall of fresh lucerne bales on the outside of our sleeping place. It was just five feet high. This was high enough to keep the lion from seeing us should it walk by in the night, but not too high that we couldn't look outside over the top. Behind us loomed a stack of hay bales that reached up to the roof. Our beds were laid out, side by side, on top of two tarpaulin groundsheets, one for the trackers one for me.

Before they retired to bed, the trackers poured water over their cooking fire – which was located outside on the far side of the shed.

Lying in bed that night was like being inside a huge straw igloo. A strong smell of cut hay and of fresh green lucerne permeated the atmosphere all around. Outside, between our protective wall of lucerne bales, and the cable wall of the cattle kraal, was the three-gun trap-setting, all loaded up and ready for the lion's visit. It did not take me long to fall asleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night – round about midnight – the cattle started to mill about. One or two began lowing softly. The soft disturbances – quiet as they were – awakened me. I lay silently in my camp bed and I listened.

"*Nkosana...?*" It was Mbuyotsi. He was whispering.

"*Jah!*" I whispered back.

"*Isiliwana yena fikile...*" *The lion has come.*

"*Meenah yee-aze...*" *I know.*

"*Aren't you going to get ready to shoot it?*" asked Mbuyotsi.

"*No! Let the gun traps do their work.*"

"*But...*"

"*Shuuuuuush...*" I cautioned him. "*Be quiet. Let the gun traps do their work.*"

I picked up the .375 from the tarpaulin next to me and laid it on top of the bed, pointing the muzzle down towards my feet. The rifle was loaded and cocked. The safety catch was on. That was as far as my readiness was going to go.

I lay in bed and I listened.

The cattle were suddenly all very still. Absolute silence reigned. They, too, were listening. I could visualise them, their heads held erect, alert, casting about with wild-looking eyes trying see where the lion was.

Then all hell broke loose. The cattle all rushed over to the fence alongside the house, crowding themselves against the far side of the kraal, jostling. There was the clatter of horns banging against each other.
There was the sound of heavy breaths being expelled. Some cows began to bellow.

The calf – the sacrificial lamb – began to perform. I could hear it struggling against the buffalo reims that secured it to the steel peg in the ground. I could hear the riems stretching – squeaking – as the calf pulled against its restraints. The calf did not know that it was quite safe as long as it remained tethered between the three sets of tripwires. It was petrified. It wanted to get back to its mother inside the kraal.

That the lion was wandering about outside somewhere I had no doubt. All the signs told me this.

The calf's bellows took on a greater urgency. *The lion was approaching.* I could visualise it walking, bold and alert, towards the calf, suspiciously looking over each and everything that it passed.

The cows in the kraal started to run around like mad things, bellowing loudly, all the while blowing air forcibly through their nostrils. Some were straining against the cable fence next to the calf. All this told me the cows had seen the lion and that it had approached fairly close.

I waited for the shot to go off. If the lion went for the calf it would be dead long before it reached it. The gun traps were all well set.

There was the sound of galloping hooves as one of the cows raced around inside the kraal. Then came the twanging sounds of breaking wires. A cow was out. It had broken through the barbed wire fence next to the house. It came galloping round the outside of the kraal. It came galloping past us outside, between our lucerne wall and the cable fence of the kraal.

"BAAHM!" The report of the rifle shot was huge. There was the sound of a heavy carcass hitting the ground.

I leapt out of bed. *Not that, I hoped. Not that. We hadn't just shot one of the cows?*

With rifle in one hand and my big spotlight in the other, I leaned over the wall of bales and shone the torch towards the calf. Sure as all hell there it was. There was the body of a dead cow. It was lying quite still next to the struggling calf. The cow's skin was twitching. As I ran the torch beam over its body, its back legs stretched out in a leisurely fashion. It was dead. Very dead!

Lights were going on in the main house. The van Wyk family was on the verge of coming out to see what had happened. They too had been listening in just the same way that I and my trackers had been listening.

I quickly returned to my bed and donned some clothes. I couldn't stand around in my 'nothings' if the family was coming out. By the time the family emerged from the house, torches in hand, I was wearing a pair of shorts and a shirt. And I had veldschoens, without socks, on my feet.

I stood between the family and the trap guns. Two were still set. I wasn't about to let anybody walk past me.

Dawid was furious. The old man was contrite but not repentant.

"But the lion was here?" the old man questioned me.

"I didn't see it. I didn't hear it," I answered him. *"But it was here all right."*

"Well, then," he responded. *"We set the trap that went off. We can leave the dead cow where it is..."*

"NO!" shouted Dawid. *"We unload everything. I don't want a second cow shot tonight."*

"MM-mmhuh," the old man contradicted his son. *"If the lion is here it's worth trying again."*

Dawid turned around. *"Come,"* he said to Magriet angrily, taking her by the hand. *"Come, Cornelius..."* he commanded his little boy. The three of them walked back to the house.

"Which gun went off?" the old man asked.

"The Martini-Henry,"

"You still got another bullet...?'

"Yes."

"Well load it up again... and let's all get back to bed."

"And the fence? It's broken..."

“I’ll fix that myself,” the old man said. *“I’ll do it right away. I have fencing pliers in the house.”*

When I had finished reloading the trap gun I returned to my bed, stripped down, and crawled in between the sheets. I was tired and I was unsettled. I didn’t blame Dawid for being cross about the killing of the cow. There were other ways to get the lion. I felt a terrible resentment towards the old man. Dawid’s father, when all was said and done, was a real *pain-in-the-neck*. I no longer thought it amusing that we young game rangers were always expected to do as he commanded.

Just after four o’clock we had an almost perfect repeat of what had happened earlier. The lion came visiting. The calf bellowed. A cow broke out through barbed wire fence near the house and it came running round to defend the calf. And – *“Bang”* – we got ourselves a second cow.

By the time Dawid got to me, I was unloading the last of the trap guns. *“Enough,”* Dawid said succinctly.

“Enough,” I repeated hoarsely. *Enough was enough*. The old man wandered out and just stood there gawking at the two dead cows. His enthusiasm had suddenly run out of steam. * * * I got that lion the following afternoon.

The day following the ruckus up at the homestead kraal the trackers and I could find no fresh lion tracks up on the escarpment. The two shots the lion had experienced, at close hand, had probably unnerved it.

“Maybe it’s gone back down to the river,” Ben suggested.

We canvassed all the sandy surfaces on all the dirt tracks in the mopani woodland below the escarpment. Ben sat on the left front mudguard, his right hand hanging on to the spare wheel on the bonnet. As we travelled slowly along the road his eyes never left the road surface immediately in front of him.

We checked all the cattle water points. At every one there was a windmill pumping water into a round brick holding tank. From there it fed out to a trough, with a ball valve, where the cattle drank.

Nothing...! Nothing...! Nothing...!

Then, just as I was about to give up, we hit pay dirt.

The lion had left its big pugmarks in the wet mud next to one of the troughs. The tracks were very fresh – from that morning after sunrise. The lion had slaked its thirst before wandering off in the direction of the plateau. Ben followed the lion’s tracks. Mbuyotsi went with him carrying the 9.3. I

followed in the Land Rover, to one side, driving through the veld.

The trackers passed through a cattle fence. I could not follow so I abandoned the vehicle and joined them on foot.

The tracking was difficult. The cat's big, soft, paws left few marks. For over an hour I was puzzled by Ben's superb tracking. The mopani ground that we traversed was rock hard.

Ben seemed to know exactly where the lion was going. He walked along as though he was enjoying a Sunday stroll. Every now and again, he picked up a confirmatory sign that he pointed out to me, silently, using a small twig he was chewing as his pointer.

He seemed to have got the drift of the lion's route perfectly. He followed it using two old tracking principles: the lion wanted to get from A to B, so it had a route to follow; and, *en route*, it took the line of least resistance through the bush. These two tracking principles work well when the terrain is difficult. You just have to be sure of the general line the animal is following, and you have to pick up confirmatory signs along the way. It does not work if the animal is walking about grazing or browsing.

I looked up and peered ahead. Far away in the distance I saw a cleft in the rocks on the side of the escarpment. It looked as though the cleft fed directly onto the high plateau above. *So that is where the lion is heading, I thought*. I knew, then, that Ben had deduced that fact long ago. He had probably guessed it from the very beginning – from the time he had first taken up the lion's spoor. He must have been looking for just such a clue to determine the route the lion was taking.

So, Ben had been moving through the bush in the general direction of that cleft, and the more confirmatory tracks he found the more did he become sure of his assumptions. In the beginning it had been just a good guess. The occasional footprint had vindicated his guess-work. The more tracks he found, however, the more confident he became, and the less of an effort it took to follow the lion's route. And that is what he was doing. He was not following the lion's tracks he was following the lion's route.

When we drew closer to the base of the cleft, the hard mopani clay was lightly silted with soft sand from the hilltop. The top of the plateau was basalt overlaid with Kalahari sand, and the trees up there were a mixture of teak, msasa and mfuti, the latter both *Brachystegias* famous in Mashonaland far to the north.

Once we were on the sand the tracking became very easy. Even I was

able to see the lion's footprints, one step after the other.

We followed the lion up the cleft amongst the hillside rocks, and onto the plateau. Up there the trees were tall, the undergrowth was thick and the grass was rank. It was not as good a grazing grass as that found on the river alluvials, but it represented infinitely better cover. Just looking at the relaxed manner in which the lion was travelling now, told me he was more comfortable here than he had been down in the wide-open mopani veld below.

The lion's whole behaviour changed. He lay down often and rolled about in the sand. He rested frequently. He was clearly *'at home'* here and he felt safe. And he appeared to be going nowhere fast.

This lion was a big animal. Its spoor was bigger than most of the stock-killers I had shot recently. He had survived many years as a nomad. That meant he sensed where he was safe and could stay in one place; and he knew when it was time to move on. He was not moving today. He no doubt had plans for a meal tonight – maybe back at the cattle kraal next to the big house.

This lion was certainly the one that had come to the homestead the night before. So I guessed he was going to find a place to while away the hours of daylight as he waited for the night.

I discussed this probability with the trackers. They agreed. That meant we would have to walk carefully and quietly because there was a chance we might just find this lion asleep.

We followed the winding spoor through the woodland, noting how the lion dillied here and dallied there. The more we saw of this behaviour, the more I was sure we were going to find our lion asleep. I had my ash bag permanently in my paws – testing the wind at every twist and turn of the spoor.

The hours dragged on. The sun passed its zenith. The lion would be sleeping now, but the cover was thick. It was going to be difficult to see him in the high and tawny grass.

We came to a tall, straight, *mfagaazi* tree. Here the lion had stood up against the tree trunk and stretched his front legs high, pushing its paws up as high as they would go. Then it had raked the bark of the trunk with its claws, pulling huge, ragged scars down the heavy bark. The sap that oozed out of these wounds was blood red.

I stood next to the tree and marvelled at the length of the animal that had

made those marks. This was not a small lion. This was a lion that one day soon would be going back into the game reserve to challenge one of the resident males for his territory. He would come out of such a contest either a dead lion or a new king. His time was coming. His time was coming, that is, if we didn't find him sleeping today.

I brought my eyes down from the tree and cast them into the bushes and the grass that lay beyond.

There was movement.

"*Shuuuuush,*" I warned the trackers quietly.

My rifle came up to my shoulder, my thumb automatically flicked off the safety catch as it wrapped itself round the pistol grip. There it was again. The grass tops moved. There was something in the grass and bushes not too far away. Thirty yards at the most. If it was a lion, I was ready for it.

"*Isporo?*" I asked Ben in a whisper. *The tracks. Where are they headed?*

I looked at him sideways, not wanting to let the bush ahead out of my sight. The tracker looked around on the ground at the base of the tree. He took a few steps outwards, in front of the rifle's muzzle, looking to where the tracks were going. He indicated with his hand the direction they had gone. They were going directly to where I had seen the movement.

There it was again. A movement in the grass-heads. This time I distinctly saw the heavy grass-heads moving.

"*Shuuuush.*" I whispered again.

Ben moved back to my side. I held one hand facing flat towards the ground and I patted the air – one... two... three... times – silently. The trackers got the message. They squatted down below the grass tops.

If the lion had seen us, I concluded, it would not be moving around – if it was a lion! And, if it was, it would sooner or later reveal itself. I realised that I would not be able to approach the lion any closer. The noise of me walking the intervening space of thirty yards, through the thick grass that surrounded the animal's position – even if I proceeded alone – would alert the lion long before we saw it. And, if it was a lion, I did not want to scare it away.

"*Isiliwaan?*" I asked Mbuyotsi in a whisper. The tracker shrugged. He lifted his eyebrows up and down. Then he looked at me and nodded. He wasn't sure.

"*Ben?*" Ben nodded immediately. He felt sure it was the lion. What else could it be?

"*Bwiya,*" I whispered to Mbuyotsi. *Come*. I moved back and stood

behind the mukwa tree.

The trackers got up, and moving slowly and silently, they took up positions behind me. I lent my left shoulder up against the scarred tree trunk and I waited. My rifle was at the ready. My eyes never left that bit of bush where I had seen the disturbance.

Patience now. That is what was needed. I stood my ground.

I slowly brought out my ash bag and tested the wind. Not so good. It was blowing past the place where I thought the lion lay resting – slightly to the right hand side. All it would need was a twist in the breeze and the lion would have our scent. If that was to happen... I made myself ready for it.

My rifle was all the time at my shoulder. The safety catch was off. I had the barrel aligned to where I thought the lion was located. We waited. Patience!

Then, out of the blue, it happened.

Right in front of me the lion bounced to its feet. It had caught a whiff of our scent on the fickle wind. It stood for a moment and looked around, looking to see if it could see the man that it had scented. As I focussed my sights on the lion's head the thought went through my mind that this was a magnificent animal. It had a young blonde mane but its body was huge.

If it had scented us, as I knew it had, it was not going to remain static for long. In the next moment or two, it would be bounding off into heavy cover.

My sights were on target. I squeezed the trigger. The recoil kicked my head back and it lifted my body off the tree trunk. The lion's head punched backwards with the impact of the bullet. It disappeared into the tall grass sward.

The reverberations of the shot ran loud and clear through the woodland. The van Wyks would have heard it at the homestead. I rammed a new round into the chamber.

There followed a period of great activity where the lion had fallen.

The bushes and the tall grass were being pushed around violently. None of us moved. We stood. We watched. We waited.

The tip of the lion's tail lifted above the grass... once... twice. Then all was quiet.

"Yena ifileh," Mbuyotsi announced. *It is dead*. He started to move towards it.

"Uhhhh-Uhhh," I cautioned him. *"No-No. Let it die properly,"* I said with a smile. *"Give it a little more time to die."*

I was learning. We were shooting dangerous big game animals all the time. We were starting to treat their deaths with indifference. There were times when I felt we were slack in our discipline. It was not right that we should stupidly march up to a lion we had just shot, in the expectation of it being dead. Only when I saw death staring out of their open eyes – or after I had tested their anal reaction when I poked my rifle's muzzle into the orifice – was I prepared to approach closer to an animal I had just shot. It cost us nothing to be prudent!

In this case, we could see nothing of the lion. It was foolhardy, therefore, for Mbuyotsi to walk up to it incautiously. It was better that we give it more time to die.

Five minutes later we walked up to the lion, rifle at the ready. It was dead.

That lion was the third biggest lion, and the oldest 'young nomad', I was ever to shoot.

Tony Boyce, on one of his infrequent visits to Main Camp from Robins, was sent out to deal with a stock-killing lion in the Gwaai River valley. Tony took along with him that day his pride-and-joy, his beautiful Holland-and-Holland .375 Magnum rifle with its exquisite walnut stock. This was a weapon that was coveted by every field officer in Hwange – including Malindela. No matter how exceptional that weapon may have looked, however – and no matter how fine the reputation of Holland-and- Holland its makers – Tony was forever experiencing problems with it. It had a major fault. The bolt frequently failed to properly feed rounds from the magazine into the breech. In the popular jargon, Tony was forever experiencing cartridge 'jams'.

This always seemed to happen when Tony found himself in a situation where he had to fire and to load his weapon rapidly. I had experienced Tony trying to manage this problem on many occasions. After each such occasion I tested the weapon myself, pushing the bolt forward and backward as rapidly as I could get it to move. I never experienced any jamming. Neither did Tony when he did the same thing. But the jams, at critical moments, happened repeatedly.

I began to think it had something to do with Tony's nerves. Maybe he was doing something else wrong when he was confronted with a dangerous situation. But Tony was *not* a bag of nerves. He actually handled himself very well in the face of danger. So I really don't know what the problem was with

Tony's lovely rifle. All I can tell you is that Tony had *serious* problems with it.

Tony took along with him on that day, Harry Cantle's Bushman Tracker, Johnny Mlupeh.

I don't know the ins-and-outs of the hunt that took place. The gist of the story, however, is that the lion Tony was hunting charged the hunting party and he fired at it. I don't know if he hit it or if he missed it. The next thing that happened was the lion pulled the tracker down and started to maul him. Tony was unable to shoot the lion because the rifle had jammed.

In an attempt to get the lion off Johnny Mlupeh, Tony rushed into the fray. He took his rifle by the muzzle and swung it like a club. The stock struck the back of the lion's skull, breaking off high up at the pistol grip just behind the trigger. The strike had no effect on the lion which continued to maul the tracker.

Tony tried to load the weapon again. This time he managed to get a round up the spout. He then crouched down and placed the muzzle just behind the lion's ear and he pulled the trigger. This shot killed the lion instantly. It also saved Johnny Mlupeh's life. In firing the weapon Tony had to cup the shattered pistol grip in the palm of his hand and the recoil sent sharp shards of wood deep into the palm of his hand.

That was the last anyone ever heard of Tony's beautiful Hollandand-Holland .375 Magnum rifle.

Not long after this incident Tony Boyce left the department. He emigrated to South Africa where, rumour had it, he got married to a South African girl and settled down on one of the copper mines near Musina on the Limpopo River.

* * *

At about this time I had a run in with a buffalo at the top end of the Dett vlei, just off the main tourist access road. It was an incident that was to change my life in more ways than I could ever have imagined.

Five buffalo bulls had been seen on the edge of the Dett vlei by a tourist who was *en route* to Main Camp. Upon his arrival at Main Camp the tourist had excitedly told Ian Miller, the Senior Tourist Officer, about the five big buffalo bulls that he had seen. Bruce Austen had entered the reception office at that point and he made a mental note of the fact there were five buffalo bulls at the top end of the Dett vlei.

At about ten o'clock that same morning Malindela called me into his office. He told me about the buffaloes and where they were located. He tasked me with the job of removing them to pre-empt the request that he knew would soon be coming from Bert Riding. All Bert needed to phone Bruce was just the *rumour* that there were buffalo on the Dett vlei.

At that time my parents were at Main Camp on a visit. It was the first time they had seen me since my 21st birthday in August of the previous year. They had come on a long eight hundred mile journey from the family farm at Karoi far away to the north. I had rigged out one of the three *'square-davel'* huts at the back of single quarters as a private bedroom for them. They had, perforce, to share our bathroom, and they shared our single-quarters-fare at the dining table on the back verandah.

It was great to have them with me and I loved showing them all that Main Camp and the local tourist drives had to offer. It was the first time they had met Babs – now unofficially my fiancée.

When I told my folks that I had to go out and shoot some buffalo my father asked if he might come along. I said that I had already asked Bruce about that and he had raised no objections. So, yes, my Dad could come along.

"Me, too?" my mother immediately demanded.

"Uhhh-Uh," I replied. *"Not hunting buffalo, Mum. We will be leaving the vehicle and tracking them through the bush on foot."* That idea did not appeal to her. So on that day my father tagged on behind us carrying a josak full of water. We couldn't have him doing *nothing*! He watched fascinated as we found the spoor and started the tracking. He was *not* a hunter so he knew nothing about tracking.

We found the buffalo quite easily. They hadn't moved very far from where the tourist had seen them. They were lying down on the open msusu slope that fed up into the teak forest behind them. They saw us approaching long before we saw them. The time was just about noon.

The first intimation we had that we had caught up with our quarry was when one of the buffaloes jumped to its feet. It stood in full view and blew several alarm snorts through its nostrils. Two other buffalo then reluctantly climbed onto their feet. The other two just lay there and watched us from a supine position.

I took in the details. The buffalo were about a hundred yards away and they were looking us over carefully. All three of the ones on their feet were

agitated. I knew they were going to move off in the next moment or so. The two on the ground would then follow. If that happened, I knew, it would be difficult to close the gap when we tracked them further.

A hundred yards had become too long a shot for me even at that early stage in my hunting career. I had already started to say that I could only hit an animal (like an elephant or a buffalo) if I had its tail in one hand and my rifle in the other. I also didn't want to follow them for the whole afternoon – and I knew that if I didn't start shooting soon that is precisely what we would be doing. They were not going to let me get any closer.

My old man started to talk, presumably to give me some advice. *"Shhhhuuuuu"* I cut him dead. Human speech is all that it would take to send these big bulls lumbering off.

A hundred yards! O.K., I thought, I can do it. Maybe I'd get two or three before they turn their backs on me.

I sat down on the ground and placed my elbows on my bent knees. The front bull blew another alarm snort. He turned round to look at the forest edge behind him. He was standing broadside on to me. I knew he was about to run. He looked back. My sights were on target. My target the lungs! I gently squeezed the trigger.

The bullet *whooshed* across the intervening space and smacked the big bull behind the right shoulder. What I had not realised was that he had actually been standing facing slightly away from me. That fact caused me to hit him too far forward. I should have aimed mid-rib. My bullet would then have raked forward into the lungs. Now, instead of passing through the lungs, the bullet passed through the animal's body forward of the lungs and it smashed into the bones of the left front leg on the far side.

> *This is a good example of the kind of thing that happens when you are not close enough to your quarry before you squeeze the trigger. You don't get a good enough view of your target. You don't see exactly how the animal is standing. You get your perspectives all wrong. Consequently, your shot placement is often faulty. Such errors of judgement can cost you your life.*

All the buffalo lunged away with the cracking report of the rifle. The two on the ground seemed to take wings. They erupted from their lying position into a full blown gallop making for the tree line behind them.

I struck at the bolt. I would have to shoot fast if I wanted to get myself another buffalo or two. The bolt refused to budge. I hit the knob with the heel

of my hand several times. There was no movement in it. I hit it so hard I hurt my hand. I stood up and started to fret over getting the bolt open. It was frozen solid.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see the buffalo I had hit floundering about on the ground. At that point I did not know my bullet had missed its target. I thought its lungs were filling up with blood and that it would soon be dead.

Mbuyotsi took the rifle out of my hands. He placed the butt on the ground, and holding the barrel firmly in both hands, he started kicking at the knob of the bolt with the heel of his boot. Kick... Kick... Kick.... He kept at it.

"Hauw..." Ben exclaimed. I looked at him. He was looking past me towards where the buffaloes had been standing. His eyes had grown to the size of saucers.

I spun round and got the shock of my life. The wounded buffalo, running on three legs, was racing across the intervening space. It was coming at us just as fast as it could run on three legs. It was attacking. Buffalo do not mock charge! This was the real McCoy.

Mbuyotsi handed me the weapon. The bolt was open. I rammed another round into the breech and slammed the bolt closed. I turned and aimed for the buffalo's brain. It was bouncing up and down inside its bouncing head. I pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into the buffalo's head. It had no effect. The buffalo kept on coming.

I hit the bolt hard with the palm of my hand. This time it opened. The next round slipped into the breech. I again aimed for the brain. Again the bullet slammed into that great head. Again nothing happened. The buffalo kept on coming.

Once again the bolt opened. Another round went into the chamber. The buffalo was now too close for comfort. This time I took my time. This time I waited out the sequences of events, the buffalo's rising and falling head. I worked out where and when I must shoot. I squeezed the trigger. The buffalo crashed into the ground less than ten paces in front of me. This time it was dead.

Mbuyotsi, at that stage, was hurriedly leading my father off to one side – getting him out of the buffalo's line of attack. My whole body was aquiver. My nerves were frothing!

I tried to open the bolt again. It refused to budge! This was the same

Cogswell and Harrison weapon that I had been using for all my hunting. It had never let me down before. It didn't fit me well, and it bruised my cheek and shoulder unnecessarily, but it had never failed me. There is a first time for everything! It just happened that it had failed me on the day my father was hunting with me.

That night my mother broached the subject of rifles. She and dad had obviously discussed the buffalo hunt that day. She asked me about the big game rifles with which government supplied us. She wanted to know if they worked properly and if they were safe. She wanted to know if I felt safe using them. And she asked a hundred-and-one other questions, too.

The biggest problem with using government weapons, I told them both, was that every Tom, Dick and Harry used the same weapons. Anybody could go into the armoury and take out the same weapon that I used most of the time. So nobody treated them with the love and the care that was needed to maintain them at their best. Nobody *purposefully* maltreated the government-issue weapons but neither did anybody develop an emotional ownership over them. And that was why, every now and again, we would experience problems like the one we had had that day.

"*And that could have gotten you killed,*" my mother said sagely.

"*I suppose so,*" I nodded.

Then she came to the crux of the discussion. She reminded me that she and dad hadn't got me an *'adequate'* 21st birthday present the previous year. She said they had been looking around for something that I would *really* like. So far they had found nothing. Now, she said, they had decided to buy me a rifle. A suitable rifle for my big game hunting work! What rifle did I want? She said they were prepared to pay for a good rifle, one that I *really* wanted. They would pay up to one hundred pounds for it, they said. One hundred Rhodesian pounds, in those days, was a lot of money.

Thank God for motherly instincts. My mother had decided that the best way to keep me alive was to make sure I was armed with an appropriate and functional weapon.

I thanked them *hugely* and told them I would take my time choosing a weapon that I believed would suit me best.

I was sometimes required to take faulty weapons for repair to a gunsmith in Bulawayo. His name was Ted Ottie. I got to know Ted very well. I respected him and I listened to his advice with great attention. It was on his

recommendation that, a few months later, I took possession of a brand new .458 Magnum rifle that had been manufactured by FN/Browning in Belgium. It had a full Mauser bolt-action – which I insisted upon. And with it came a canvas rifle case; a ramrod; jags and brass brushes; a small canister of gun oil; cloth cleaning-patches; and two packets containing 20 rounds each of 500 grain solid Winchester ammunition. The cost, altogether, was sixty-seven pounds and ten shillings!

At that time, few people in the department had ever heard of a .458 Magnum. Certainly nobody had ever used one. The calibre was in fact, then, very new to the hunting world. I was the first one in the department to get to own one. Bruce Austen, knowing I would be using this rifle on my hunting tasks from then on, immediately ordered 300 rounds of .458 Magnum solid ammunition. I was in immediate business.

* * *

The week that I got my new rifle I shot my two end-of-week rationbuffalo-bulls with it. I could sense the much heavier *thump* as the slightly slower 500 grain solid bullet impacted with the buffaloes' bodies – compared to the zippy through passage of the higher velocity 300 grain .375 solids. There seemed to be little difference in the end results. That day both buffaloes ran off into the heavy sinanga with lung shots, just as they would have done had I shot them with .375 solids. And when they fell over after their lungs filled up with blood, they issued the self same swan-song bellow that I was familiar with using the .375.

I was surprised that I experienced no discomfort when firing the .458. I had expected a much more bruising recoil than I had become used to with the .375. But that didn't happen. The feeling, the sensation, was *different* but it was not uncomfortable.

The .375 fired a lighter bullet at a higher velocity than the .458 Magnum, and the recoil was a short, sharp, punch. After I had fired twenty or thirty .375 shots in quick succession – knocking out a cow herd of elephants – I was left with a very tender shoulder. I also had to contend with the upward kick of the stock onto my cheek. A gruelling cow herd kill often left the right hand side of my face more tender than was my shoulder. The biggest problem I had with the Cogswell-and-Harrison was that the rifle didn't *'fit'* me. Had the weapon I used fitted me better I might well have opted to buy a new .375 Magnum.

I had become used to the .375 Magnum calibre and I was becoming very

confident with it. Furthermore my competence grew every time I used it. I had come to respect its penetration capabilities and I was learning to accept that its knock down power was deficient. I had, in fact, started to make allowances for that deficiency which was not good! There are times when the knock down power of the bullet is the only thing that stands between the hunter living and the hunter dying. But, in those years, I had not garnered enough experience to understand this. I was compensating, therefore, without understanding the implications.

Many people have marvelled at the light weight of my .458 rifle. Everybody assumes that because it is light, and because it fires a heavy 500 grain bullet, that it must kick like a mule. The recoil is heavy – yes – but it is more akin to a heavy *'push'* against my shoulder than a sharp kick. And the rifle's stock did not punch up into my cheek like the stock of the Cogswell-and-Harrison .375 did. The biggest difference between the Cogswell-and-Harrison .375 and my new .458 rifle, therefore, was that the .458 fitted me properly. *That* made all the difference.

I had many problems with my new rifle. Everything was not plain sailing, and the problems came one after the other. My colleagues started to look askance at the weapon I had purchased believing it to have been badly manufactured, or that it was an unfortunate bad specimen. The FNBrowning factory in Belgium had a good reputation so the critics of the rifle settled on the opinion that the particular rifle I had purchased was just a hapless dud.

I had early problems feeding rounds from the magazine into the breech. The cartridges didn't leave the magazine early enough causing severe stiffness in the feed. You had to push very hard on the bolt to get a round from the magazine into the chamber. Ted Ottie shaved miniscule amounts of metal off the inside edges of the magazine until the cartridges slipped easily into the breech. The bolt action and cartridge feed, therefore, became as smooth as a hot knife cutting through butter.

Then I had problems with the under-side magazine cover falling open when I fired a shot. This happened not all the time but on enough occasions to make the experience a hazardous one. The rifle's recoil was heavy enough to force the steel spring-clip, on the bottom magazine plate, backwards. This allowed the plate to fall downwards.

This happened to me one day when I was in the middle of a cow herd of elephants in the Tjolotjo gusu. I was shooting elephants one after the other, and I had elephants very close all around me when, suddenly, the bottom

cover of the magazine fell open. All the cartridges in the magazine spilled out from the bottom of the rifle. They fell into the sand at my feet. I was lucky to get out of that situation alive.

Ted Ottie fixed that problem by simply inserting a screw through the edge of the magazine cover into the steel superstructure that encased the magazine in the stock. This fixed the problem once and for all.

The next problem occurred in the same Tjolotjo teak forest not long after the last incident. I was again in the middle of a herd of elephants when the whole foresight ramp flew off the front of the barrel. I had to think very quickly to get myself out of *that* predicament. Without a bead at the end of the barrel I had no device with which to aim the rifle. I had elephants all around me inside ranges of ten and twenty yards. So I carried on as if nothing was wrong. I had no other option!

I snuggled into the rifle, looked through the rear vee-sight, put the imaginary front bead I could see in my mind onto the position of the brain. And when I pulled the trigger the elephant dropped dead. I finished off the breeding herd in this fashion, continuing to kill the elephants that I fired at, all without a foresight bead.

Ted Ottie obtained a new foresight and ramp for the rifle and he sweated it back onto the end of the barrel in the normal fashion. The very next hunt I lost that whole front foresight mount again. Again I shot out the herd at very close quarters without a bead. The fact that I was shooting cows and the fact that I was using 500 grain solid bullets, instead of 300 grain bullets, no doubt helped to knock down all the big cows. In both these instances none got away. I killed them all.

Ted Ottie again sweated a new foresight ramp onto the end of the barrel. Then he fitted a steel sleeve around the outside of the muzzle and he slotted the two ends of the sleeve into the grooves he had cut on both sides of the new foresight ramp. This physically fixed the foresight ramp in position and I had no further trouble.

During the following eighteen months Ted Ottie repaired a lengthwise split in the stock through the pistol grip – caused by excessive recoil – and he put two extra steel lugs through the stock to take the recoil pressure off the wood at those places. At this time I asked him to lighten the trigger pressure, too, which he did. Thereafter my .458 Magnum rifle has had such a light trigger pressure most of those hunters who have tested it call it a ‘hair-trigger’.

Nothing else was ever done to this rifle.

I used that rifle for most of my big game hunting work during the next twenty-two years. It has worked perfectly during some very extensive and heavy hunting activities. It has never let me down. Today that weapon is just on fifty years old. It looks well used. The stock is dark and polished from many, many years of sweating hands and rough handling. The full Mauser action still works perfectly. It has the original barrel through which have probably been pumped something like seven or eight thousand rounds. And at the ranges one shoots big game animals, it is still as accurate and as effective as it was when Ted Ottie last fiddled with it.

During the period when I had all the trouble with this weapon my colleagues used to tell me they would throw it on the rubbish heap and buy another one. I didn't. Why? Because it was special gift from my mother; and because I couldn't afford to buy another one anyway.

That rifle served me well throughout my long big game hunting career. I still have it. Ted Ottie served me and that rifle well, too. Alas, the grim reaper took him away many years ago.

* * *

Shooting two buffalo bulls a week for rations provided me with an enormous opportunity to gain a great deal of buffalo hunting experience in very quick time. Over the three years that I was involved in this work, I honed my buffalo hunting skills to a very high polish. We also developed the recovery of the carcasses to simplistic perfection.

> *In addition to the ration buffaloes, every winter we shot up to ten buffalo for head office biltong. Head office also collected biltong from all the other major big game stations in the department. The director distributed the biltong, in large cardboard packing cases, to the head offices of all the government departments that had helped us in our work programmes during the year.*
>
> *When the Rhodesian Bush War was in full swing this largesse was extended to include the offices of all the military commanders, and the officers' messes of the Air Force, every major army unit and the B.S.A. Police. Most of this biltong was made from the meat of buffaloes.*

Once I had become proficient at hunting buffalo I was normally able to place two good shots into two buffalo bulls at the very first encounter. The interval between these shots was often between just two and three seconds. If I was

unable to get in two good shots at the very beginning, I was forced to conduct two separate hunts in the one day – and that could be a drag. In every case my targets were the buffaloes' lungs. One bullet through a buffalo's lungs was enough to ensure its very quick demise.

I can't remember ever seeing a buffalo cow herd near Dett. The cows stayed deeper inside the park. There were, however, always bulls there. They were commonly several singletons and groups comprising twos, threes and fours. Bigger bull herds numbered up to ten. They drank from the sewage spillage pool and (during the rains) they spent the night eating the sprouting green grass on the railway fireguard.

We normally picked up the buffaloes' tracks on the fireguard road. We left the Land Rover under a tree next to the road, and we tracked the buffalo into the park. These hunts were all conventional hunts starting with us following the spoor with Bushman trackers. We used all the regular aids – like ash bags – and we shot them with rifles in the normal fashion. The only difference between these hunts and other buffalo hunts was the purpose of the hunt. We shot *these* buffaloes specifically for meat.

Getting those two good shots into the lungs of two buffalo, one after the other, required that I be very sure of what I was doing. Whenever I misplaced a bullet, I spent the rest of the day tracking the wounded animal down – and *that* wasn't fun! I quickly discovered that it was easier to get in those two good shots when you were able to stalk to a very close range without detection. And *that* is where the thick sinanga helped. * * *

Mid-1961 saw us making a long section of the Main Camp vlei into an airfield. The ground was dead flat, nearly a mile wide and over a mile long. It was an ideal site for a bush airstrip, but I was sad to see this change come. I was content with Hwange Main Camp as it was and I looked upon this development, and all the other developments, with selfish and jaundiced eyes.

The powers that be, however, had decided that Main Camp was to become a tourist destination for passengers using the Central African Airways DC 3 Dakota aircraft. Known locally as *'The Vomit Comet'*, the Dakota or dak, was a stalwart of the air. In those days, it was the backbone of the federal airline's domestic routes.

The clearing of the airstrip required that we stump out a whole woodland of thorn trees along the entire length of the 2000 yard runway. It also required that we chop down half a mile of teak forest, one hundred yards wide, on the eastern approach.

I was tasked with the job of clearing the Main Camp vlei of thorn trees.

The stumping out of the trees was easily and quickly accomplished. I attached the stumped trees, with chains, to the tail hitch on my Land Rover and I dragged them away to a distant place on the far side of the vlei. There they were left to dry and later burnt. The holes left behind in the ground were re-filled with the soil spillage from the stumping. When all this had been done the track of the runway was still strewn with twigs and sticks broken off from the trees that had been felled. And on the twigs and sticks there were fastened a myriad of three-inch long thorns. I had visions of Daks landing and getting punctures one after the other. All these sticks and thorns had to be removed.

I collected all the rakes and wheelbarrows on station and returned with them in the Land Rover. Then I got the boys together and I gave them instructions. Some of them, I said, should rake together all the sticks and thorns and leave them in small heaps, here and there, all over the demarcated runway. Others were to pick up the heaps of sticks and thorns, and place them, by hand, into the wheelbarrows. And the wheelbarrow loads of sticks and thorns were to be transferred to the back of my government Land Rover for disposal elsewhere.

This was the final task before a grader was used to level the open air field we had created. It was no mean task. The cleared runway was 2000 yards long and fifty yards wide.

My son-in-law, who helped me edit this manuscript, commented that my use of the term 'boys' in the narrative is 'politically incorrect'. He suggested that I should use, instead, the more currently acceptable label 'workers' or 'labourers'. This idea rankles because, in the colonial days that I am here recording, we used the word 'boys' to signify 'workers' or 'labourers' without any derogatory connotations. These 'boys' were 'MY boys'. I liked them and I cherished them, just like all good South Africans like and cherish our national football team, Bafana Bafana – a euphemism for 'Our Boys'. So, although my use of the term 'boys' in this context may well be 'politically incorrect' in this day and age, it is 'historically incorrect' to use the alternatives in the context of the historical and colonial times that I am here recording. So I am going to continue with my use of the term 'boys' in this historical and colonial story – and those who don't like it can lump it!

Some of the boys were hesitant. They had not understood my instructions. So

I went over it all with them again. Speaking in the local *lingua franca – fanikaloh –* I told them: *"I want you to rake together all the sticks and thorns, and I want you to leave them in heaps on the ground so that the guys with the wheelbarrows can pick them up easily."* I repeated my instruction. *"I want you to put all the sticks and thorns into lots of different heaps... Mahohboh... Mahohboh... Mahohboh..."* I used my hands to demonstrate what I meant by *'mahohboh'*.

> *'Hohboh' in most Rhodesian (Zimbabwean) native languages means 'a heap'. The prefix 'ma' signifies the plural. So Ma-Hohboh means 'lots of heaps'.*

Sumbe was amongst the gang receiving these instructions a second time. He suddenly came up to me, his face beaming. *"MAHOHBOH"*, he said in a strange kind of way. He looked at Ben, then at Mbuyotsi, who were both working nearby. He made sure they were listening. He returned his smiling face to me. *"MAHOHBOH,"* he said again. *"Nkosana,"* he said more loudly now, *"MAHOHBOH will from now on be your native honour name."*

I was perplexed. I knew the trackers had been searching for a suitable native name for me, and that they had been having trouble settling on what that name should be. It would either be a simple 'nick name' or it would be a native 'honour name'. An honour name is one that would command respect from those native people who knew what it meant.

'MAHOHBOH', I thought. What kind of name is that?

"Kanjaahn?" I enquired of Sumbe. Why MAHOHBOH?

"MAHOHBOH is a good name," Sumbe assured me. "It will tell people of your prowess as an elephant hunter... Wherever you go, Nkosana " he said in further explanation, "you leave heaps of dead elephants behind you... Mahohboh... Mahohboh... Mahohboh." He mimicked my own voice and my own hand signs of just a few short moments before. He smiled at me again, showing me both his teeth and his gums. Sumbe did not have a nice smile but it was always genuine.

"MAHOHBOH," he said again, as if to convince himself.

Sumbe nodded. "Yes... MAHOHBOH is a good name", he said.

"From now on people will know you as MAHOHBOH".

And that is how and why Malindela's Bushman tracker, Sumbe, bestowed upon me, at the ripe young age of twenty-one, my African honour name. It has stuck fast for the last fifty years.

* * *

Bruce Austen, the great Malindela, was a remarkable man in many ways. For the duration of World War II he survived as a rear-gunner in Bomber Command of the British Royal Air Force. I am advised that the average life-span of a rear gunner in British bombers during the war was just eleven seconds of gun-firing time. Bruce led, therefore, a charmed life but he told me once that he survived because he fired at every aircraft – friend or foe – that came anywhere near his rear gun turret.

Bruce told me many tales about his war service in the Royal Air Force. Some were naughty tales that I cannot relate in a book such as this. Many of them I would not commit to written record anywhere. One story, however, tells of a remarkable experience.

Very early one morning, Bruce's Lancaster bomber was flying back somewhere over France when it was attacked by a German fighter – a Messerschmitt 109. This happened after a bombing raid over Germany towards the end of the war. Bruce's aircraft had successfully dropped its payload and was racing home to England, low level, over French farmland. The German aircraft appeared from out of nowhere and began a long diving attack on the British aircraft flying beneath it. At the appropriate time Bruce opened fire on the attacking German and, as luck would have it, he hit his target. Smoke began to stream out of the stricken machine's engine.

The German fighter rose steeply to gain height. The pilot bailed out. The aircraft turned over and crashed into the ground.

Sometime after the war Bruce attended a function in Germany where a number of British and German airmen got together in a spirit of friendly camaraderie. At that function Bruce met a German fighter pilot and they began swapping war stories. When Bruce told the German that he had been a rear gunner in British bombers during the war, the pilot informed Bruce that he had been shot down over France towards the end of the war by the rear gunner of a Lancaster bomber flying low level over French farmland. When they compared notes, dates, times, location and circumstances, it became apparent that this was the pilot that Bruce had shot down. The inevitable happened. The two of them formed a special bond and they became life-long friends.

The German was a keen bird hunter. So was Bruce. They had, therefore, something else in common.

After the war, the German started working for the Mercedes Benz motor car company. In the November of 1961 Bruce flew over to Germany to visit his friend. He returned home six weeks later with the latest model Mercedes Benz motor car, with the most beautiful Churchill double-barrelled 12 gauge shotgun (bought in London), and two German Weimaraner pointer-retrievers – a dog and a bitch.

During Bruce's absence overseas something of considerable consequence happened.

* * *

Shortly after Bruce had left for Germany I went out to execute my regular weekly chore – to collect two buffalo bulls for Main Camp's staff rations. As was usual I went to the teak forest just outside Dett village. Our search for fresh spoor started, as it did every week, on the sandy fireguard track. Four Bushman trackers came with me to help cut up and load the carcasses. Sumbe was one of them, so was Mbuyotsi.

Ben was there, too, but he was hung over from a binge the night before and, I suspect, also from too much dagga (marijuana). He was in disgrace. I insisted on bringing him along, however, to teach him a lesson. I was going to make him walk through the hot hours of the day whether he felt he was going to die or not. He was not going to die, I knew that, but I was going to make him wish that he was going to die. It was my way of disciplining him.

The rains broke early that year and the burnt grass stubble on the railway fireguard was sprouting green. We found the tracks of seven buffalo bulls that had spent the night grazing on the fireguard. The road was criss-crossed with their tracks for upwards of a mile out from the first houses of Dett village.

It took Sumbe and Mbuyotsi some time to sort out which tracks to follow because the buffalo had been moving in and out of the forest edge throughout the night. Working out which tracks were which was made doubly difficult because, although they were clearly one group, they had been well spread out. In addition to that, they had been grazing every night in this manner for the last week. So the trackers had to unravel the *'yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's tracks'*, too. This was never an easy task.

I remained in the warm Land Rover cab, waiting. Ben and Rojas, the third and fourth trackers, sat on the back. I let Sumbe and Mbuyotsi sort out the tracking mess. It was just after dawn and it was cold outside the vehicle. The forest foliage was damp from intermittent drizzle during the week and

the light dawn breeze acted like a refrigerator fan.

After about twenty minutes Sumbe emerged from the forest edge and stood on the road looking at the Land Rover. He signalled to me that he and Mbuyotsi had found the tracks they wanted us to follow. With a swing of his arm he indicated that the buffaloes had, at that point, finally entered the gusu and had walked on southwards.

I got out of the Land Rover and strapped on my cartridge belt. It had a fearsome weight – a weight that was to be my companion for the rest of the day. The belt was heavier than normal. Today it carried twenty-five rounds of 500 grain .458 solid ammunition instead of the usual twentyfive rounds of 300 grain 375 cartridges. The difference in weight was significant. It was something that I was going to have to get used to. That morning the extra mass was particularly irksome because it was strange.

I slipped my new rifle from its canvas case. I checked that there were three solid rounds in the magazine. It was full. Three cartridges was all the .458 magazine held. All the .375 rifles on station carried four rounds in the magazine. The .458, therefore, had this distinct disadvantage. It made me wonder again if, perhaps, I had made the wrong choice in calibres. Maybe I should have purchased a .375? It was too late now! I had what I had and I was going to have to get used to it.

One advantage the .458 bullet had over the .375 bullet was its much greater *'knock-down'* power. I was still to discover that the heavier bullet also had just as much penetration as the .375.

I drew a single a soft-nose .458 cartridge from my trouser pocket. It showed a broad blunt lead point and the bullet weighed 510 grains – 10 grains heavier than the solid! In Bruce's absence, Harry had ordered a hundred of the soft-nose cartridges. He had a fascination for this softnose bullet.

Harry had been particularly keen that I should use one on a buffalo that day. The soft-nosed bullet was so much bigger and so much heavier than the .375 bullet that Harry had pronounced it would *'turn a buffalo inside out.'* It was planned that I should shoot a buffalo in the lungs by placing my soft-nose bullet behind its shoulder from the side.

Looking down at the bullet I was in two minds. I had used soft-nose .375 bullets on buffalo before and I was not impressed. I was already starting to prefer solids of any calibre, to their soft-nose equivalents, for use on dangerous game. I had three reasons for this preference.

First of all, I had already experienced reduced penetration when a .375 soft-nose bullet, after hitting a bone *en route* to the target organ, expanded hugely. In the popular jargon soft-nose bullets *'mushroom'*. They make a proper mess of the target when they hit it – yes – but, even then, I was of the opinion that it was better to use a solid bullet and thereby make sure the projectile would fly true through the carcass. Solid bullets always had enough energy to plough through bone-and-meat and they then carried on straight to the vital organ at which they had been aimed. Distorted soft nose bullets, once they had hit a bone, can thereafter move anywhere from that point within the animal's body – and they often did.

Secondly, especially with the .458 soft-nose bullet, which shows an awful lot of lead at its blunt point, slivers of lead often peel off the bullet's nose when it is pushed from the magazine into the breech. This is exacerbated if soft-nosed bullets are kept in the magazine. The heavy recoil of the .458 forces all the bullets in the magazine to bump up hard against the front wall of the magazine every time the rifle is fired. This seriously flattens the broad soft lead point. And by the time you get round to fire the bottom round in the magazine, its point is by then often completely flat. When trying to push that last round in the magazine into the chamber, therefore, huge chunks of lead sometimes peel off on the curved breech guide. This leads to cartridge jamming, and people who hunt dangerous big game animals *all the time* don't want to know about cartridges jamming.

Thirdly, you cannot, at the last moment, push a soft-nosed bullet into the chamber when you get an opportunity to get in a good side-body lung or heart shot. You have to have the soft nose bullet *already* loaded in the chamber, ready to fire, before you close the final gap. And then, if the animal you are stalking suddenly charges you down – or if another animal you haven't even seen suddenly attacks you from the side – you have the wrong kind of bullet in the chamber for that very dangerous circumstance. Brain shots need solid bullets!

This, I was about to learn, is the *biggest* of all dangers that can confront a hunter when he uses soft-nosed bullets on dangerous game.

So, even at this early stage of my big game hunting career, I was already beginning to evaluate practical issues of this nature. And as my experience grew so my dislike of soft-nose bullets for big game hunting increased; and my preference for solids developed. My ideas on this subject unfolded as my experience with the .458 Magnum, especially, expanded.

As Harry had said that morning, however, we would never know what the .458 Magnum soft-nose bullet does to a buffalo until we had tried it. Somewhat reluctantly, therefore, I pressed the soft-nose cartridge on top of the three solids in the magazine, with my thumb and I slid the bolt home pushing that single soft-nose bullet into the chamber. I shut the bolt and put it on safe. I now had one soft and three solids in the rifle.

I took my jacket off and laid it on the Land Rover seat. The cold really hit me then but I knew I could not wear the jacket on the hunt. By ten o'clock the sun would be baking hot and we would have no need for jackets, and I had no intention of wearing or carrying my jacket all day long. We would just have to grin and bear the cold breeze in the morning. It would not last long.

I tested the wind. It was blowing gently but firmly from south to north. That meant we would be walking with our noses directly into the wind. That was great. We could not have wished for a better breeze.

"*Hendeyi,*" I said to the two trackers sitting on the back of the Land Rover. Let's go. I ignored Ben completely. Today he was a nobody. Today he was *'in Coventry'*. Both Bushmen climbed out of the vehicle over the tailgate and made ready to follow me. They each lifted a full josak from the vehicle's decking.

The buffaloes had walked through the gusu in a loosely scattered formation. Their tracks were easy to follow on the crisp, damp, sandy soil. The teak leaf-cover was thick. The sinanga was dense beneath the high teak trees, and the sicklebos bushes were sporting cascades of delicate purple-and-yellow Chinese lantern flowers. The hook-thorn brambles were covered in fuzzy yellow catkins. It was the start of the rainy season.

The buffaloes' tummies were loose, the result of eating too much fresh green grass on the fireguard stubble. Their diarrhoeal green splats, in places, covered the bushes along their tracks. Very soon we were wet with their excrement from the waist down and we were stinking headily of fresh buffalo dung.

In less than half-an-hour we entered an area of open woodland. Here the canopy trees were far apart and there was no sinanga understory. The sun penetrated right down to the ground.

I immediately began to glow in the tepidity of the sun's early morning rays. They stroked my bare arms and bare legs with a balmy and seductive touch. The soft heat penetrated directly onto my back through my thin khaki shirt. The sudden warmth was euphoric. It turned my thoughts away from the

task at hand.

At this place, there were many clumps of coppicing teak scrub sprouting from the ground in tight stands of twenty to thirty saplings at a time. Each coppice varied between ten and fifteen feet in height and, because the sun penetrated here right down to the ground, they were bedecked in heavy green foliage from top to bottom. They looked like an army of independent Christmas trees, their full skirts touching the ground. Each clump was separated by three or four feet wide avenues of bare yellow sand.

Enjoying the rays of the warm sun, my mind was in neutral as I followed Sumbe. He twisted and turned through the coppices, religiously following the tracks.

Then right in front of me – right in front of Sumbe – there was the scrambling sound of a buffalo getting up from the ground. This was followed by a loud *'whoooooosh'* – the noise an alarmed buffalo makes when it blows air heavily through his nostrils.

Sumbe dived into the middle of the teak coppice right at his side.

Mbuyotsi, behind me, read the signs. He disappeared I know not where.

I pulled my rifle from off the top of my shoulder. I had been carrying it, in a leisurely fashion, by the pistol grip which was wrapped in my right hand. The wooden fore piece slapped into my left hand. I brought the rifle to bear, my thumb automatically flicking off the safety catch. In a flash I was ready for action.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, I was standing face to face with a befuddled and totally surprised buffalo. Its eyes focussed on me malevolently. At that exact moment it picked its nose up and belligerently thrust it towards me. It was no more than three paces in front of me. I could see nothing but its head.

For a brief moment time stood still. I was well inside the animal's attack circle. Far, far too close for comfort. In the miniscule part of the second that all this took place, I knew the buffalo was about to charge.

The rifle butt was on my shoulder. My eyes sought out the bead and the back vee-sight. I put the bead on the buffalo's nose just as it moved to launch its attack. I pulled the trigger.

The recoil kicked my upper torso backwards. I saw the buffalo's head punch upwards as it's body fell backwards, and its head disappeared into the heavy foliage.

We had walked right into the middle of the seven big buffalo bulls that

we had been tracking. Feeling the warmth of the hot sun on their bodies, they had, one by one, bedded down in the scattered open spaces between the coppicing teak. There they had been dozing away the early morning hours, chewing the cud, and enjoying the warm rays of the sun.

That single alarm snort, and the rifle shot, alerted the other buffaloes in the group. Suddenly, unexpectedly, they now knew about our presence right in amongst them. None of them had scented us because the wind was in our favour. And, not knowing exactly where we were located, they got up and ran every which way all around us. Pandemonium reigned.

I rammed another round into the chamber. Then, in next to no time, I had panicking buffaloes running wildly past and all around me in every direction. At exactly the same time two buffaloes burst through the foliage, three or four paces away, on my left hand side. One or the other of them, as they passed me by, was going to hook me with its horns. Shooting one and not the other, therefore, would not have helped.

I dived into the coppice behind me to find Mbuyotsi already in there. I lay there quietly with the Bushman. We looked at each other, wideeyed, inside our private little wigwam. And the big buffalo bulls ran around within touching distance outside, smelling us now but not knowing where we were. They were in total disarray.

Then, suddenly, they were all running away. In a single group they raced off into the wind. When I heard their hooves pounding into the Kalahari sand of the forest floor, my body began to relax. I was shaking like a leaf. So was Mbuyotsi. Cowboys don’t cry! But they are allowed to be afraid! It had been a close call, a frightening experience, and I was very glad we had all survived it.

In the turmoil that had followed my shot, the buffalo I had hit got up and took off with the others. The soft-nose bullet had failed to penetrate to the brain – or it had missed its brain entirely.

We gathered ourselves into a cohesive group and set off after the fleeing buffaloes. We saw blood droplets all along the way. There were pools of blood in the sand wherever and whenever the animals stopped to rest. When they were running, they kept on going into the wind. The bush was so thick they heard us coming every time we caught up with them. We flushed them many times without ever seeing them or them us. They didn’t wait for an invitation to keep going.

The first time they stopped they had travelled less than a mile. They had

turned to face their back trail looking and listening for a sign of pursuit. After that they ran for five miles before stopping. These buffaloes had been hunted before!

They changed direction and began moving across the wind. After another mile they changed direction yet again. Now they were moving with the wind. This enabled them to smell us long before we got anywhere near them. They were now moving back towards Dett.

Determined to get the wounded animal we pushed on. Sumbe, the head tracker that day, never once lost the tracks. The tracking was easy. Silence was of the essence and, since two people made less noise than five, I instructed the other three trackers to follow on Sumbe's and my tracks, and to keep well to the rear.

At about ten o'clock the wind changed. It softened, too. The direction of the buffaloes' flight changed with it. So they kept on running *with* the wind. There were no flies on these buffaloes!

We flushed them many times that morning. The intervals between our contacts got shorter and shorter as the big bulls tired. They moved. They found a place in thick bush to wait and to listen for sounds of pursuit. And when they heard us coming they ran off again.

What I didn't properly get to grips with, because I was then ignorant of what happens during such a relentless hunt, was the fact that as the buffaloes got more and more tired they got more and more angry, too. They were not at all impressed with us pushing them from pillar to post all day long.

I was about to find out just how angry a *pushed* buffalo could become.

Then, for the first time in hours, I got a glimpse of their black bodies. They were standing waiting, listening for sounds of our continuing pursuit. My heart beat faster. I quickly looked for a sign that would tell me which bull had been wounded. A bit of blood on the snout, maybe. A hanging sore head! Nothing! One wary old bull saw us and, with a loud '*whoosh,*' he turned and galloped off. The others followed.

This time they ran for a mile before we caught up with them. Again they got our wind. Again they galloped off – unseen. This performance was repeated half-a-mile further on. I could *feel* the buffaloes' tiredness. This egged me on. I *wanted* that wounded animal dead.

The big bulls were getting agitated. That *feeling* was in the air, too. Sensing my quarry's mood was an instinct I was to hone to a *'T'* in the years ahead. It saved my life on many an occasion. Although my experience was

still very raw at that time, a prodding sixth sense told me that a charge was imminent.

Ahead of us, in the thick teak scrub, we heard oxpeckers chattering. A soft churring sound. The little brown birds were fossicking over the buffaloes' bodies looking for ticks. It was a dead give-away. The birds thereafter became the focus of our attention.

The tracks at our feet were fresh but we knew the oxpeckers were on the buffalo. So, when we could hear the birds, we stopped tracking and we walked directly towards their chattering calls, looking carefully at each black mass in the bush ahead that might prove to be a buffalo. This tactic gave us the opportunity to use the wind better.

The herd was walking tiredly ahead of us, pushing resolutely through the thick bush. Despite their tiredness, they were trying to put distance between themselves and their tireless pursuers. They got our wind. They ran off. Half-a-mile further on we again heard the oxpeckers.

Then we heard the buffaloes themselves. There was the sound of stiff brush scraping against tough hide, a grunt, the odd snapping of a dead stick underfoot, the rustle of leaves, a soft *'clut'* sound when two horns connected.

They had turned and had begun walking obliquely across the wind back towards Dett. *At last,* I thought. *Now we'll have a chance of getting in close enough to find our wounded friend.*

A spot of fresh blood adhered to a dried leaf at our feet. Sumbe gestured to it with eyebrows raised, eyes lowered, and with a nod-to-the-side of his head. It confirmed our wounded buffalo was still with the group.

We again abandoned the tracks and we walked fast towards the sounds made by the moving buffaloes. The twittering calls of the oxpeckers were incessant.

Sumbe was two paces in front of me walking fast and silently. He canvassed the bushes ahead with experienced eyes. Behind him I, too, searched ahead for sign of the buffaloes. My ears were tuned to catch every sound.

I held my rifle in both hands at the ready. There was a 500 grain solid bullet up the spout. The safety catch was on half-cock. My thumb was ready to flick it fully off. I was prepared, I thought, for anything.

Suddenly everything changed. What happened next seemed to happen in slow motion but in reality it occurred with lightning speed.

The next incident, start to finish, took place in less than ten seconds.

Sumbe stopped abruptly in front of me. He glanced halfway around to his right. For a brief moment he looked hard and fast at a point slightly behind and to the side of my right shoulder. His eyes suddenly grew to the size of saucers. Then he turned and took off, running like a hare.

I had only half turned, swinging my rifle to the right, when a loud and guttural grunt flooded my senses. It seemed to come from directly under my armpit, so close to me did I feel its presence. That deepthroated grunt was a sound that I came to dread. It was the sound of coming death.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw happening what I already knew was about to happen. Just five yards away, a huge buffalo bull erupted from a clump of thick bushes. Its dark bloodshot eyes were focused directly on me. It had been standing there, well hidden, unmoving, silent, awaiting our close approach. There was no doubt it had heard us coming. There was no doubt it had seen us. This buffalo had had enough of being pushed around all morning so it had waited for us in ambush. It was angry. Its intent now, without doubt, was to kill me.

In one lurching rush the buffalo was in a full-blown charge. Spinning round to face my adversary, I had just time enough to swing my rifle, at waist height, towards the rushing animal. My thumb released the safety. When I pulled the trigger mere feet separated the rifle's muzzle from the buffalo's nose.

The rifle kicked back and upwards. I flung myself backwards, falling, as the huge boss of the beast lowered to hit me.

The heavy bullet hit the animal square in the chest. It had no effect. The buffalo came on as if nothing had happened. It hooked with its left horn, the tip racing towards my right armpit. My rifle was still gripped in both my hands but it was over my head. I was, at that stage, falling backwards fast.

The hooking horn missed, the tip passing my face mere inches away. Its wet nose brushed the right-hand side of my body – nudging me on. The buffalo's head rose high following the fierce thrust of the upsweeping horn. I had been lucky but I was not about to get away unscathed. In its forward rush the buffalo's galloping front legs then smacked into my calves. The impact was huge and heavy, numbing and paralysing the muscles instantly. My legs were knocked away forwards. Falling backwards at this time, the impact spun my body in the air just before my back hit the deck. This brought my head and shoulders directly under the buffalo's belly. It also removed me from the

direct line of the buffalo's sight.

The buffalo continued its forward momentum. Its galloping back legs kicked me forward, one hoof impacting with my ribs, the other with the back of my head. The strikes rolled my body over 360 degrees. I was back onto my back. Bright sparkling lights exploded in my vision.

When the buffalo's head came down it saw Sumbe running away mere yards ahead. Changing the focus of its attack the angry old bull left me, bruised and sore, in the sand behind. Had Sumbe not been in front of the buffalo at that precise moment I am quite sure that buffalo would have turned and gored me to death. But Sumbe was there and that saved my life.

The Bushman grasped at a sapling with the intention of swinging his body fast and sharply to one side. It was an old trick the trackers used to get out from under a charging animal's attack. This time it did not work. The buffalo's boss hit the tracker squarely in the middle of his back. At the same time the cleft of a cloven hoof splayed across the Achilles tendon of his one heel, pegging his foot to the ground. When the force of the impact smacked Sumbe's body forward, the buffalo's hoof peeled the flesh off either side of the tracker's heel.

Sumbe went flying through the air, his arms and legs akimbo, ahead of the buffalo's deadly attack.

I sat up awkwardly in the sand and rammed a round into the chamber. Snap-shooting from this sitting position on the ground, I banged a bullet into the buffalo's rib cage raking forwards. The big bull staggered. Its determined forward rush faltered. It was hit sufficiently hard to leave alone Sumbe's sprawling and squirming body now lying on the ground in front of it. The buffalo ran on. Lurching to my feet I fired the last two rounds in the magazine directly into the running buffalo's anus. Those last two bullets, I knew, would course forwards in its body through a whole host of vital organs.

The buffalo was gone – gone into the dense bush to our front.

The danger was over. In front of me Sumbe lifted his body from the undergrowth into which he had rolled. I felt relieved. He, too, had survived the ordeal. Released from the tension my body began shaking uncontrollably.

I reloaded the rifle's magazine with quivering hands, the cartridges drawn from the ammunition belt about my waist. Putting a round up the spout I set the rifle to safe.

My first concern was to tend to my injuries. My ribs were seriously

bruised but none were broken. They were sore as all hell. There was a massive swelling behind my left ear where the buffalo's hoof had smacked me hard. I fingered it gingerly. Bright lights were still exploding in my vision and a serious headache was settling in.

In the distance I heard the long, low bellow of a buffalo *in extremis*. Our fierce old warrior was down. One of my bullets had found its mark. The old bull was gasping its last few breaths.

Then the screaming started. I looked up to see Sumbe stumbling through the bushes. He was wailing like a banshee. *That* is what caught my attention – the wild and strident wailing. Something was wrong. I was groggy on my feet but I tried to run over to where Sumbe was rampaging amongst the bushes. My bruised and battered calves, however, refused to function. I was able to stand but that was about all. I looked desperately and helplessly at Sumbe as he tried once again to run. He began hobbling-in-a-hurry all over the place. I knew then that something was very *seriously* wrong.

The tracker came lurching back towards me. His eyes were huge and a strange and continuous wild caterwauling issued from his mouth.

Mbuyotsi came rushing up. Sumbe, on seeing him, hobbled away again, screaming.

"*Go catch him,"* I instructed Mbuyotsi.

Mbuyotsi ran after his Bushman colleague. He first grabbed at him roughly but missed. He was clearly a slippery customer – not so easy to catch. Finally, he pounced on him, wrapping his arms about Sumbe's legs in a shoddy rugby-like tackle. Having pinned him down, Mbuyotsi dragged his friend back to me, pulling him by one arm. Sumbe, all the while, was whimpering like a puppy.

Just as they reached me Sumbe broke free. He threw himself onto the ground, rolling over and over in the sand and in the leaves and amongst the sticks of the forest floor. The screaming started up all over again. It was then that I saw the massive wound in his right forearm.

I blanched and forgot all about my own injuries. They were inconsequential by comparison.

Mbuyotsi grabbed Sumbe again, this time holding him down tight in a sitting position on the ground. Ben and Rojas were now standing next to me. They looked on in horror.

Sumbe's dark skin was grey. When I touched him his body was icy cold. Yet he was sweating profusely. Water was streaming from every pore on his

head and face.

Sumbe turned imploring eyes towards me. *"Mahohboh,"* he said. *"You have killed me. You have killed me… Now just let me die."* He then fell over onto his back and rolled his eyes.

I knelt down next to Sumbe and lifted his hugely damaged arm by the hand. It was clear the wound had been caused by one of my .458 bullets. It was the rib-cage shot that had done the damage. The bullet had exited from the buffalo's body just forward of its right shoulder. It had gone on to hit Sumbe in the arm as he was flying through the air.

The first thing I thought was: *Thank God it wasn't a soft-nose bullet!*

> *The best way to describe Sumbe's wound is to ask you, the reader, to imagine the tracker sitting at a table with his right forearm lying on the tabletop, the palm of the hand facing upwards. The bullet had come from behind the tracker narrowly missing his body. It had entered his forearm just to the left of the elbow joint. It had then progressed through the flesh just above the two bones of the forearm, exiting on the right hand side of the wrist. Only the bullet had not just entered and exited. After leaving the buffalo's body, the bullet had been tumbling through the air, cart-wheeling, nose-over-tail. Like a churning metal grinder it had ripped a huge hole in the flesh of the tracker's arm. The entire muscle of his inner forearm had burst open – it had exploded – in a massive jagged wound.*
>
> *When I lifted Sumbe's arm by the hand the only thing joining his elbow to his hand were the two bones of the forearm. There was a thick blue and pulsing artery running between the elbow and the wrist. All the flesh that had once surrounded the bones, and all the other major blood vessels, had been blown away. The flesh hung in a heavy open slab of meat between the wrist and the elbow, the skin facing away from the body, the raw muscle facing towards it. I could have put my fist between the bones of the arm and the torn muscles hanging beneath them. Despite the massive damage there was very little bleeding.*

Ben and Rojas held Sumbe's hand and arm firmly in their hands. This allowed me to remove what I could of the sand and the leaves and the twigs of the forest floor that was adhering to the open flesh. I instructed Rojas to remove his shirt which I tore into bandage strips. I then began the task of re-assembling the torn and twisted muscles in some semblance of order around the naked bones. And I bandaged them in place. When this was done we lifted the now supine and silent tracker to his feet.

Mbuyotsi ran eight miles back to Main Camp to get help. Ben – now completely sober – and Rojas, supported Sumbe on either side as they frog-marched him for two miles to Livingi Pan. Livingi was on the track between Main Camp and Dett. Surprisingly, on this forced march, it was the torn flesh of his Achilles tendon that caused Sumbe the most pain. His back toubled him, too – where the buffalo's hard and heavy boss had hit him fair and square. He was to have great trouble with his back when he lay in bed in hospital in the weeks that lay ahead.

I hobbled along behind the trio, impaired by two painfully bruised calf muscles that were all the time threatening to seize up. My head was ringing, the swelling behind my one ear was burning hot. My skull was on fire. Flashes of brilliant white lights continuously impaired my vision. And I nursed a badly bruised rib cage.

Harry arrived at Livingi in his short-wheel-base Land Rover. He drove us all to the place where I had parked the government Land Rover on the fireguard track. Then Harry returned to Main camp. He knew, without asking, that I would insist on seeing that day through. Harry had already alerted Sister Anna, the Rhodesia Railways nursing sister in Dett. He had told her, by phone, that we would be arriving shortly with a gunshot patient.

In Dett Sister Anna gave Sumbe his first real medical attention. Other than to more professionally clean his wound and to give him an injection of morphine to kill the pain, however, there was very little more she could do for him. After her expert attention, I drove Sumbe to Hwange Colliery Hospital, eighty miles away. There I found a pre-warned and well-prepared medical team awaiting our arrival. The stalwart little Bushman then underwent immediate and emergency surgery.

Every one of Sumbe's shattered arm muscles were re-joined in the correct manner by a young surgeon called Dr. James. Nerves from his thigh were transplanted into his arm to replace those that had been obliterated by the bullet. Bit by bit the brilliant young surgeon reconstructed every damaged part of Sumbe's shattered arm.

Sumbe not only survived the events of that day he emerged a much stronger person. In fact, after the wounds had all healed, I gauged that he had lost only about fifteen per cent of his arm's function. Remarkable but true.

Sumbe was given an eighty-five per cent lump-sum disability pension.

In later years Sumbe worked for me extensively. We hunted many more

buffaloes and many elephants together, and he helped Ben to track down several of the black rhinos that I captured. Not once did he allow the fact I had been responsible for his wounding interfere with our relationship or our friendship.

Whilst Sumbe was still in hospital a policeman came to get a statement. This was normal procedure following a shooting accident. Sumbe refused to give a statement – saying he did not want to get me into trouble. Later, the policeman told me that all Sumbe was prepared to say was: *"It was a friendly bullet that went wrong. Had Mahohboh not shot the buffalo when he did, it would have killed me."*

The buffalo we killed that morning was not the one I had wounded earlier in the day. That one we never found.

The hunt had been an expensive and painful lesson. It was one of many that taught me many things about big game hunting. After several similar experiences I later stopped using soft-nose ammunition altogether on big and dangerous animals.

That hunt helped me to understand that, when hunting buffaloes in a group, it is normally *not* the wounded one that charges you. It is more often than not an unwounded animal that attacks. The buffalo that lies in wait for you is one that is *not* sore and is *not* incapacitated by a wound. The buffalo that ambushes you is normally one that is *not* hurt at all. It is not, therefore, frightened of the hunters that are pursuing it. It is a buffalo that has come to the end of its tether. It is an angry buffalo, one that is totally fed up with being pushed around from pillar to post all day long.

The hunt that day was for me the beginning of another very long learning process. It led me to an understanding that the wounded buffalo is NOT the most dangerous of big game animals to hunt. It is the UNWOUNDED buffalo, the one that has built up a huge rage from being pressure-hunted all day long, that is the most dangerous of them all.

It was as a consequence of this hunt, too, that I began to put together my ideas about attack and escape circles that surround wild animals all the time.

This subject was fully explained in my book MAHOHBOH so I won't repeat it here. The existence of attack and escape circles is the only way to rationally explain the reasons why some dangerous big game animals run away from the hunter and why others charge him down.

* * *

As the day approached for Bruce Austen's return to Main Camp I grew ever more restless and apprehensive. Sumbe had been Malindela's tracker and personal patrol assistant for many, many years. What was Bruce going to do, or say, when he learned that I had nearly blown the Bushman's arm off in a shooting accident?

Sumbe actually got back from the Hwange colliery hospital about two weeks before Bruce returned from Germany. So when Bruce arrived back Sumbe was still carrying his arm in a sling.

On the very first morning after Bruce's return, he called both Sumbe and me into his office. He sat us down in comfortable chairs in front of his desk. My world started to fall apart. I felt like I had walked into a courtroom where I was going to have to vindicate my actions during that fatal hunt – actions that I had really had no control over whatsoever.

Malindela asked me to tell him my side of the story first. Then, in Tswana, the language of the Botswana people, he asked Sumbe to tell his side of the story. Even though I was in both their company I had no idea what the two of them were saying to each other.

"Well then..." Malindela concluded after hearing Sumbe's side of the story. He spoke to us both in English for my benefit. *"It seems it was a perfectly understandable accident. And you both showed a lot of grit."*

The relief I felt on hearing those words reverberates in my soul today – fifty long years after Malindela said them.

Then Bruce directed his attention towards me and he said: *"You are lucky it was Sumbe you shot. If it had been anybody else he might not have been so honest and so protective of you. I don't know what it is that you have with the Bushmen,"* he said, *"But none of them is prepared to say a word against you."*

My heart nearly burst in my breast. Tears came freely into my eyes.

"Go now. Bugger off. Both of you!" Bruce then said gruffly, helping me hide my growing embarrassment. *"Get the hell out of my office."*

That was the last I ever heard of the matter. Bruce Austen had simply closed the case. It was no longer a matter for discussion. * * *

On the 20th February 1962 I was on a horse patrol. That night I camped at Tum-Tum. At that stage the track we had cut into Tum-Tum from Makololo the previous year, had been through nearly a whole wet season. The rains had been dismal but enough to get the new route overgrown with grass and

weeds. No attempt, at that time, had been made to grade the road with a mechanical grader.

Our patrol animal complement comprised one horse, two mules and six donkeys – the normal numbers. During the day, they had filled their bellies with the good green grass that was growing all around the pan. That night they were tethered to saplings and tree trunks growing on the big anthill some twenty metres back from the edge of the pan's water.

There was no prospect of rain so I had my groundsheet tarpaulin laid out beyond the canopy of the big ebony tree that grew on the anthill. This was an abnormal arrangement because I preferred to sleep *under* a tree canopy. Dew falling during the night is lighter under the branches of a tree. And the position I chose that night was further away than normal from the horses. One of the deciding factors with regards to the positioning of my bed that night was that the wind drifted from me onto the horses. Another was the fact that I had an uninterrupted view of the blueblack night sky.

Something special happened on the night of 20th February, 1962, that made me go to all this trouble.

The horses were enticed back into the camp that evening by the customary rattle of hard crushed mealies in the empty baked-bean tin. They were unhobbled and fastened to their posts for the night. The donkeys were herded in. They, too, were tied up.

The pile of dried wood that had been brought into camp by the trackers during the day was distributed and arranged in three piles next to where the fires were to be lit. One of the firewood piles was positioned near to my bed.

As that stage Mbuyotsi had stopped sleeping on the tarpaulin next to my bed. He slept with one of the two groups of other Bushman who manned the other two fires. I guess he thought that I no longer needed to be mollycoddled.

Ben prepared a hole in the ground next to the head of my bed into which he set a long lean pole. He fastened my mosquito net onto the top of the pole. I instructed him not to put the net over the bed but to rather just to let it hang slack behind my head. The rains had been so poor there were not many mosquitoes about. But the net was there and ready should that position change.

That night I did not want the night sky obscured by *anything*.

I had an early supper and retired to bed, lying fully clothed on top of the blankets. I immediately moved my small transistor radio to the head of my

bed and switched it on. I used the radio, normally, only to listen to the news. That night I listened to the radio well neigh until midnight. This, too, was not normal.

The Bushmen did not go to bed at all. Instead, they discussed my strange behaviour quietly as they sat around the kitchen campfire where all five of them had congregated.

The reason for all this? That night that the American astronaut, John Glenn, ensconced in a tiny space capsule, was propelled into outer space on the nose of a giant rocket which lifted off from Cape Canaveral in Florida, USA. When its fuel was exhausted, the rocket separated from the capsule and returned to earth. John Glenn continued in his capsule, in a prescribed orbit around the world, high up in outer space. His flight that night was man's first attempt to circle the globe in a space vehicle. I think every radio in the country that night was tuned in to that epic journey. There were no television sets in Rhodesia in those days.

Glenn's first orbit was an historical event. He then attempted a second orbit. And whilst he was circling the earth high up in space the second time, there was a great deal of speculation as to whether or not he would try for a third orbit. The radio commentary was continuous. He eventually completed a third circuit then splashed down safely, under parachutes, into the Pacific Ocean.

It was exciting and historically significant stuff and I lay on my bed, listening avidly, as my eyes searched the skies for sight of the magical spacecraft. I don't think it ever crossed over the Rhodesian skies but I believed everybody who was listening that night was also looking up into the heavens to see if they could spot it.

In those days the skies were full of satellites – more commonly referred to by their Russian name, *sputniks*. They were then all relatively small objects carrying technical equipment only, and they were relatively close to earth – compared to the modern and much bigger satellites that now orbit the earth much further away in space. The sputniks then were very visible – not like today's satellites which nobody can see.

That night, as I lay in bed listening to the transistor radio, and looking up into the night sky, I saw sputniks on eight different occasions and no less than twenty-six shooting stars. But I saw nothing that I could say was the craft in which John Glenn had sailed in through the heavens.

It was well after eleven-thirty that night when I switched off the radio. I

waited and I listened long enough to hear that John Glenn had been safely recovered from his spacecraft in the Pacific Ocean. All this while all five of the Bushmen had sat and watched me – wondering what was going on.

I was preparing to strip down and get into bed when Mbuyotsi wandered over with a burning log to light my fire. The other four Bushmen sat still and silent as they watched him approach me. The tracker put the burning log onto the ground and he piled kindling on top of it. Then, turning to me, he said: *"What's going on? Why have you been listening to the wireless, and why have you been staring into the sky all night? All the boys want to know what is going on."* If nothing else, the Bushmen had been observant. And they were clearly most curious.

I smiled to myself. The fun was about to begin. I had expected questions but not one of this intensity.

Most of the Bushmen knew about satellites. They didn't know what they were but they knew of their existence. Most of them had seen a sputnik. They called them *"the kanyedzis – the stars – that walk across the sky."*

I looked at Mbuyotsi and I pondered my response. *"Tonight,"* I said to him solemnly, *"there was a man in one of those kanyedzis – in one of those stars that walk across the sky."*

"Ikanyedzi – yena njenga ndeki?" The Bushman responded. *Those stars – they are like an aeroplane?*

"Something like that," I answered simply. *"But they have no wings like an aeroplane has wings, and they fly much higher than aeroplanes can fly. They are actually flying in space – in the place where the stars stay – high up in the heavens."*

"Haaauuu..." was the tracker's incredulous response.

Some of the other Bushmen had wandered closer to hear the conversation. *"Tell the guys to come closer,"* I suggested. Mbuyotsi shouted over to the others in his Bushman language. They all hurried over and gathered round my bed. Kitso took over the job of getting my fire going. I was, at that stage, sitting on my camp bed and the trackers squatted eagerly on the ground all around me. And, as my fire started to flame I could see the intensity of their interest etched on every face.

Mbuyotsi harangued them in their own language telling them what I had just told him. As he was speaking, he made gestures with his hands towards the sky. And then, at that moment, he spotted a sputnik. He pointed to it and talked excitedly to his fellow trackers. Everybody's eyes were, for a few short

moments, cast towards the sky as they watched the sputnik cross the heavens above us.

"And tonight..." Mbuyotsi told them with some pride at his prior knowledge, *"There is a man flying in one of those kanyedzis."* *"Haaaiieee..."* some exclaimed in doubt.

"Haauuuu..." others said, believing but in astonishment.

For the next half-an-hour I sat on my stretcher with my Bushmen friends and colleagues all around me in the firelight, and I told them all about John Glenn's history-making adventure in space.

Only Kitso remained doubtful. He, in fact, had not seen the sputnik that Mbuyotsi had pointed out to them. He had *never* seen a sputnik. His eyes just could not pick up such a miniscule point of light as it progressed through the dark skies amongst the stars.

* * *

On another occasion we were on horse patrol and camped at Mukwa Pan near the railway line, one day's ride west of Ngamo. We were on our way back towards Main Camp. There was a single windmill serving the game water supply at Mukwa. It provided enough water – just – for the game animals that lived in that area. There was always a lot of sable at Mukwa.

There was enough water at Mukwa that day to supply our camp also. If there hadn't been we would have had to camp at the nearby Mukwa railway siding. There was always water at the Mukwa siding. It was brought there by Rhodesia Railway's steam engines and stored in big steel tanks, on the ground, next to the railway line. This water served the needs of the coloured ganger who lived in a house there. It also served his native staff that lived in the nearby railway compound. It was their job to maintain the railway line between Ngamo and Kennedy sidings – both twenty-odd miles away in either direction.

Just after we had called in the horse and the mules to the camp that evening, and had served them their ration of crushed mealies, I looked up into the darkening skies and there, high up in the still blue but darkening heavens, I saw a sputnik. It was approaching us head on. The sun had set but it was still light enough to read without a lamp.

The sunlight reflected brightly off the satellite as it came steadily on towards us. It shone like a beacon in the darkening sky.

"Kitso," I shouted to the Bushman as he was leaving the mule he had

just tethered. The tracker looked up at me in response. *"Come here, quickly..."* I said to him loudly. He started to move towards me. *"Quickly,"* I said to him urgently. *"Jijima... Baleka." Come quickly. Run*. He came rushing over, finally standing in front of me in some bewilderment, wondering what the urgency was all about. This drew the attention of all the other Bushmen who were all diligently carrying out their evening chores – preparing the horses and the camp for the coming night.

"Look..." I said to him pointing up at the sparkling jewel in the darkening sky. *"There is a sputnik. See it coming towards us... there... high up in the sky."*

Kitso looked up to where I was pointing. The satellite was then still very bright. It was moving quite fast so it was very obvious. But, as I looked at it, the bright sparkle of its light suddenly faded. Then it blinked out. It had moved out of the sunlight into the shadow of the earth. The sun was no longer able to shine on it and tell us where it was.

"Where?" asked Kitso, perplexed. He could see nothing. He was looking intently into the evening sky, to the exact place where I had indicated the sputnik had been flying. But, by then, it was gone.

"It's gone," I told him unhappily. *"It's still up there,"* I explained, *"but it has passed into the shadow of the earth. The sun is no longer shining on it so you can't see it at all now."*

"Hah!" Kitso exclaimed. He looked at me almost angrily – as if I had been playing games with him in front of all his mates. The Bushmen nearby laughed much to Kitso's annoyance. He stomped off and started, silently, to sort out dried logs from the camp's woodpile to place next to the sites of the three night fires.

Kitso's reaction upset me. I determined there and then to find him a sputnik and to turn him into a believer. That night I saw no clear sputniks so, for another night, Kitso remained a sceptic.

The next night we camped at Kennedy No. 1 pan, further along the railway line but some distance from the tracks. Kennedy One was on the tourist route to Ngweshla.

Kennedy One was served with two boreholes, one with a windmill the other with a diesel engine. The windmill was pumping. The engine was silent. The following day we would be returning to Main Camp to end the patrol.

That evening, just as we were bringing in the horses again, I searched the

skies looking to see if my elusive satellite of the evening before would oblige. And there it was. It was just as bright and it was coming in at us on exactly the same course.

"KITSO..." I shouted loudly. The Bushman was standing at the kitchen fire putting extra logs onto the burning coals. He looked up at me again, an almost forlorn look on his face. I could see the words running through his mind. *Oh no... Not again*.

"COME..." I almost screamed at him. *"COME! "QUICKLY"*.

Notwithstanding his doubts Kitso came running over to me. *"Jah, Mahohboh,"* he said when he arrived. *"What is it?"*

He saw me looking towards the evening sky again and he looked up there, too. I pointed to the bright sparkling *kanyedzi* that was racing towards us. It again shone like a beacon against the dark blue velvet texture of the heavens behind it.

"Haaah!" Kitso exclaimed in surprise. He saw it. A bright smile lit up his face. He looked at me, beaming. Then he turned to his mates and, pointing to the sky, he shouted at them: *"NANSO! NANSO LOH KANYEDZI NA-MAHOHBOH."* Look! He said, *There is Mahohboh's star. There is the kanyedzi that walks across the sky.* Kitso was ecstatic. At last he had seen a sputnik. In that instant he became a believer.

All the Bushmen had stopped what they were doing. All their eyes were staring up at the fast approaching satellite. They all had smiles on their faces. Then, just as had happened the night before, the brightness of the star faded. Then its sparkle blinked out.

"*HAAAUUUU..."* The Bushmen all exclaimed in unison. They had now seen, but did not quite believe, what I had told them had happened the evening before.

That night was hilarious, informative, frustrating and aggravating – and much, much more – all at the same time. After supper all the Bushmen demanded that I explain to them why the *kanyedzi* had suddenly 'died'.

First of all I had to explain to them that the earth was not flat. It was, in fact, round like a ball – like the moon is round. Then, using the fire to symbolise the sun, I explained how the sun that gave light to us during the day, like our camp fire gave light to us at night; and I used one of our aluminium camp pots to show how the earth turned on its axis. This I explained, using the same pot, was how night and day came about. I did this by illustrating how the side facing the fire was in light (daytime) whilst the

other side was dark (night time). And I explained, by revolving the pot on its axis, how night turned to day at any one spot on the pot's surface, and vice versa – all the while walking round and round the campfire (our symbolic sun) to make my point.

I then introduced a smaller pot to represent the moon – moving it round and round the bigger pot in my one hand, whilst I held the smaller pot in the other hand. And I did all this whilst I walked round and round the camp fire. In this fashion, I explained how an eclipse of the moon occurred; and how an eclipse of the sun happened. Then I introduced a tin mug to represent a sputnik and I showed them how a sputnik could be *'eclipsed'* in the shadow of the earth.

Long after I went to bed that night I lay and listened to Mbuyotsi explaining to the others how he understood the planetary systems worked. Kitso's voice was prominent amongst all the others. It appeared that, now he had actually seen a sputnik, he was determined to become an expert in the matter of heavenly bodies and space travel. I eventually shouted at them, telling them all to *"shut-up and go to bed"*. * * *

In the early hours of the morning I was awakened by the screaming of the horses. This always brought me to a state of immediate wakefulness. This was no time to dawdle. A screaming horse required immediate attention.

At the head of my bed stood the usual sapling pole with my unused mosquito net hanging limply, full length, from its top. Beyond the mosquito net the horses were tethered five or six metres away. I always slept with my head toward the middle focus of the camp (to where the horses were tethered) and with my feet facing away from it.

The fire next to my bed was dead. I was alone on the upwind side of the camp. This was a ploy that I had been applying for some time – ever since Mbuyotsi had stopped sleeping next to me at night. And after I woke up every morning to find that my campfire was just a heap of cold ashes.

Sleeping on the upwind side of the camp meant that nocturnal breezes drifted from me towards the horses. It was my idea that should a lion or hyena approach my sleeping form at night the horses would get wind of it and waken the whole camp.

I grabbed for the torch that was always lying in the same place on the ground next to my bed. I twisted three quarters sideways inside my blankets and, holding the torch in one hand, I pushed the mosquito net to one side with

the other. I switched on the torch, directing the beam towards the horses. Just one look at the horses always told me in which direction the danger lay – because their eyes and their ears were always pointed in that direction.

The horses were looking directly at me! Their ears were focussed onto a position right where I was lying!

I swivelled round and nearly died of a heart attack. My heart rate changed from being passive one second to running wild like a sewing machine at full throttle the next.

Right at the bottom of my bed sat two huge black-maned lions. They were sitting side by side, on their bottoms, their front legs holding their heads up high. So close were they to my bed that the blankets at the foot of my low-to-the-ground camp stretcher obscured their feet.

I put the torch beam directly onto their faces, flicking it from one to the other. They both turned their heads to one side and looked away – displaying no sign of aggression whatsoever. They were clearly much more curious than they were intent upon getting a meal. I was conscious of my loaded weapon tucked under the edge of my mattress, on top of the canvas sheet of the stretcher. It was within immediate reach of my right hand – but I had no time to pick it up. In a precipitous action, my right hand grabbed the pillow at the head of my bed and I flung it hard at the two lions. It hit one of them full in the face. Both lions erupted, grunting loudly, their big bodies and heavy manes swirling majestically backwards away from the bed. Then they turned and loped away into the night.

I sat up in my bed, the rifle in my hands, and I pumped two bullets into the air above the lions' heads. But, by then, they had already disappeared into the night.

Mbuyotsi came running over. *"Hah!"* he exclaimed. *"Isiliwana... Eeees Faaahnie."* Why Mbuyotsi always found these dangerous happenings *'funny'* I have no idea. I never questioned him about it. It was just an innocuous and superfluous expression he had picked from God knows where. It had recently become part of his persona.

My heart rate subsided with the departure of the lions but my body still tingled with the excitement. I gave Mbuyotsi the rifle. *"You'd better put another two rounds in the magazine,"* I instructed him. *"And get this damn fire burning again."*

I did not sleep for the rest of what remained of that night. I lay still, on

my side, and for a long time I watched the logs on the fire burning. I dozed on and off. The lions did not come back and I did not hear even a squeak out of them during the night.

Just as dawn was breaking Ben brought me a mug of steaming coffee. I took a sip and put the mug on the ground next to my bed. It was too hot to drink. So I lay back for a few minutes listening to the brumming of ground hornbills in the distance. I watched the eastern skyline turn from gray, to crimson, to pink, then to bright yellow. I sat up, then, and drank the coffee. It was time to get up.

Another horse patrol was coming to an end. Last night's space adventure with my trackers had made it more enjoyable than normal. And the visit of the two lions had made it even more *'interesting'*. I loved every moment of my horse patrols.

* * *

A lion can hide behind one single blade of grass. A bit of an exaggeration? Maybe! But it's damn near true. Lions do not need much cover to disappear right before your eyes. This fact was driven home to me, once again, early one morning in 1962.

I had been called out the previous day to deal with two lions that had been killing cattle at the bottom end of the Dett vlei on Dahlia Ranch. The report came in after lunch and I got to the kill site mid-afternoon. I hurriedly set Main Camp's five gin traps around the half-eaten carcass of a cow the lions had killed the night before. I left the kill site just on dusk.

I thought I had hunted these two lions before – recently. Once on Dahlia Ranch and once on what we called *'the hillbilly farm'*, Jim Chatham's ranch, right next door to the Gwaai River Hotel. On both these occasions, the lions never came back to their kill. That fact told me these were veteran stock-killers. They knew the ropes. But maybe, just maybe, they would come back to *this kill*. You always had to assume they *would* come back. If you didn't set the traps with that expectation why set traps at all? So I went about my task of trap-setting with all the guile I could muster.

> *Nevertheless, every time I set gin traps for lions or leopards I felt that I was cheating. I always believed that, no matter what they had done, the majestic big cats deserved a better and less ignoble route to their deaths. But, then, I remembered Jim Chatham losing 101 head of cattle the previous year – to one lion that he had inexpertly tried to hunt and trap*

himself – and my conscience evaporated just as quickly as it had tried to intervene. Jim had called us in to help him only after he had taught that lion all the anti-hunting tricks in the book. We tried to kill it, but we never got it! Jim, therefore, paid a very high price for his self-indulgence. A pod of well-laid gin traps, set around the lion's very first kill, would have prevented that terrible cost.

Jim Chatham also paid a heavy price for another foolish act. He shot that lion – at least we thought it was that same lion – in the face with a shotgun. He had been out shooting birds – guineafowls and francolins – when he had expectedly bumped into the big cat. He had only bird shot shells in both chambers of his double-barrelled shotgun at the time – because he was out shooting birds. The lion had mauled him badly, sending him to hospital. One of our game rangers (I think it was Tony Boyce) went out and killed the lion the next day – by which time it had become totally blind. Both eyes had received several lead pellets from the shotgun shooting.

All these experiences caused me to drop any and all pretences about our use of gin traps to catch stock-killing big cats. I stopped trying to make excuses for our actions. My attitude hardened. When I was called out to kill a stock-killing predator I was not there to indulge in a recreational sport. I had a job of work to do which required that I kill the stock-killers as quickly as possible. And if that required that I use gin traps or poisons that is what I did. I did not concern myself with any emotional reaction from an ignorant public. I got on with the job of doing what I had to do.

If the two lions I hunted that day were the same two lions I had tried to trap before, they had accounted for something like ten head of beef cattle in the last month or six weeks. It was time their reign of terror came to an end.

The kill-site was only half-an-hour's drive from Main Camp so I spent the night back in my own bed at single quarters.

Dawn the next morning found me travelling down the Dett vlei dirt road towards Dahlia Ranch. Ben and Sumbe accompanied me.

Sumbe, at that stage, was back in business. The huge raw scar on his right arm was horrendous and his use of that arm was still greatly impaired at that time. But he could still track! He kept the wound covered with a handkerchief, the two bottom corners of which he tied around his wrist. The two upper corners he tied round his arm above the elbow. Thus shrouded, the

scar was covered from public view but the fact of the handkerchief drew everybody's attention. And everyone wanted a peek at the massive and still raw-looking wound. It wasn't everyday that you met somebody who had had half his arm blown to pieces by an elephant gun's heavy bullet!

If nothing else Sumbe must be credited with a high degree of entrepreneurship. When he attended weekend beer drinks – which occurred every Saturday night in the Main Camp native compound – he would give people a brief look at his wound provided they bought him a mug of beer. His weekend binges for years, therefore, cost him very little.

As for the money he obtained from government, from his once-off injured-on-duty disability grant... well... he exhausted all that inside six months on wine, women and song. That made Sumbe no different from any of the other natives and Bushmen trackers who lived in the Main Camp native-staff compound at that time. Every one of them would have done exactly the same thing. They lived for today and they left tomorrow to look after itself.

I had, at that stage, bought myself a newly reconditioned shortwheel-base Land Rover from a mechanic acquaintance who lived in Livingstone. The four cylinder side-valve engine had been completely overhauled, the whole vehicle had been re-sprayed (dark green) and the khaki canvas canopy was new. It was, effectively, a brand new vehicle and a bargain at one-hundred-and-fifty Rhodesian pounds.

On the morning of this lion hunt I used my own new Land Rover, for the first time, on official duty. Sumbe sat in the passenger seat across from me. Ben sat in the back with his head between us, looking through the windscreen. The light was pale as the day was still waiting for the dawn and there was a light smoky mist in the air from some drizzle during the night. The road wound its way along the edge of the vlei and disappeared into the mist half-a-mile away in the distance.

We were on our way to examine the traps.

Ben, who was staring far ahead into the murky fog, suddenly pointed to the front. *"Nanso..."* he said. *Look there*.

I looked to where he was pointing and I saw two dark brown shapes wandering towards us. They were on the road but far away in the distant haze. I took my foot off the accelerator.

"What are they?" I asked Ben.

"Anghaazeh," he replied. *I don't know*.

"What do you make of them?" I asked Sumbe at my side. I made a gesture, pushing my face and nose towards the two forms we could all now see. I drew the vehicle to a stop.

The animals on the road stopped, too. They stood and looked at us, as we were looking at them. They were a good half-mile away, obscured and shrouded by the sombre gloom.

All three of us peered through the windscreen into the murky light. I worked the rubber wipers to clear the windscreen of its tiny mist droplets.

Far away ahead of us, in the colourless half-light of the early dawn, we could all now more clearly see two large animals standing still on the bare gravel road.

"Donkeys!" Sumbe announced positively.

Donkeys? We were outside the game reserve and not far from the cattle fence that marked the beginning of Dahlia Ranch. So maybe Sumbe was right. They could have been donkeys – donkeys that had jumped the cattle-grid on the road.

I put the vehicle into gear and slowly advanced down the road.

As we drew closer both animals lifted their heads high and stared at the approaching vehicle. They were clearly apprehensive about the Land Rover.

Then I recognised them for what they were. I was looking at two very large male lions. I stopped the Land Rover in the middle of the road. Ben handed me my binoculars which he had extracted from behind my seat. I examined the big cats minutely. They were lions all right. And they were huge. They both sported long and heavy black manes. They were beauty personified.

"Isiliwana!" Sumbe said from the seat beside me. *Lions.*

"Isiliwana," I confirmed, nodding my head. They were, indeed, lions – two beautiful male specimens.

They were three hundred yards away now. They stood for a long time, quiet, unmoving, looking intently at the Land Rover. I looked back at them through the binoculars.

Ben slid my .458 out of its canvas case.

"Are these our lions?" I enquired of Sumbe.

"Yes," Sumbe replied immediately. *"They are walking up the road from Dahlia Ranch,"* he reasoned. *"Their kill is now only two miles away. It must be them."*

I agreed.

The road ran along the edge of the vlei which was on our right hand side. On our left the ground rose sharply into heavy teak. There was a deep, wide, and heavily grassed storm drain on both sides of the road. Fifty yards beyond the storm drain, on the left hand side of the road, the teak trees started. Between the road and the gusu there was sparse and wiry grassland, and some light msusu scrub.

One of the lions left the road and ambled off into the brush on the left-hand side. After a short pause the other one followed. Their movements were graceful and leisurely. They were in no hurry. I quickly lost sight of them both.

I quietly opened the door of the Land Rover and stepped out onto the gravel. I strapped my cartridge belt about my waist. I took the rifle from Ben.

"You guys stay here," I instructed the trackers. *"I'm going to walk quietly down the road. Maybe I'll see them lying up in the scrub."*

I set off alone, walking quietly and slowly down the road. I had three solid bullets in the magazine, another one up the spout.

There had been a shower of rain during the night. The sandy road surface was damp. So when I came to the spot where the lions had been standing on the road their huge pugmarks were clear to see.

The lions had moved off at right angles to the road. For a short distance their spoor was obvious even after it left the gravel. Where they had traversed the storm drain, their legs had brushed the glistening raindrops off the grass tops all along the route they had travelled. Their legs, therefore, had drawn a dull line through the sparkling droplets.

I could see that they had climbed the open cut beyond the storm drain, moving upwards towards the forest edge. Half way up the slope, however, their aerial spoor petered out. At least, from the road, I could not see the whole route they had followed.

I stopped on the lion tracks, turned and faced the forest. My rifle was at the ready. The safety catch was off. I just knew the lions were lying in the brush somewhere just in front of me. I could *feel* them watching me but I could see nothing. Patience was now my best companion.

The ground sloped sharply from the storm drain as it rose towards the teak. The grass was wiry and sparse. Indeed, the cover between the road and the forest was altogether very thin. There was the odd msusu sapling growing amidst the grass. There were short msusu bushes growing out from

underground root-stock that had survived the last scorching veld fire. The sparseness of the grass, and the otherwise openness of the slope, made me believe the lions had travelled right to the edge of the forest.

The first of the big teak trees, and the much thicker teak scrub beneath them, began abruptly, like a solid green wall, higher up the slope. I imagined the lions had entered the teak thickets. I could see them in my mind's eye, selecting a concealed spot in which to lie down and, from there, to watch me walking past

My eyes canvassed the open grassland in front of me time-and-time again. Nothing! They repeatedly penetrated every nook and cranny on the forest edge. Nothing! My eyes repeated the searching process again-andagain. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! I left no stone unturned. I knew – I believed – that somewhere in front of me, and not too far away, there were two very big lions watching my every move.

I doubted the lions had walked deeper into the forest. The rain had left the vegetation dripping and big cats don't like getting their coats wet. When conditions are damp lions and leopards use roads and paths in preference to walking through heavy grass or brush.

I tried to put myself in the lions' shoes. What would I have done if I were one of them? I would have gone to ground within sight of the road and I would have watched and waited until the puny white man had walked past. Then I would return to the road and continue my journey.

If I was correct, the lions would be lying somewhere in front of me watching my every move. I knew that, if I was patient, their curiosity would eventually get the better of them. In time, one of them would move, so as to look at me more directly.

Alternatively, their nerves would break. If that happened they would get up suddenly and, with heavy grunts, they would lope off deeper into the forest. I was ready for either eventuality.

So I stood calmly and quietly on the road, searching every nook and cranny that could possibly hide a lion. My eyes repeatedly roamed over every tuft of grass and every bushy coppice between me and the forest edge. They also probed the much thicker forest edge itself. Nothing drew my attention.

One minute turned into two. Then three! Then four! Then I saw movement not thirty yards away, right in front of me. Almost surreptitiously, right out in the open, a huge lion's head, fringed with its dark mane, rose up out of the sparse and wiry grass.

I could not believe my eyes. How the hell had that huge animal hidden itself away in such flimsy cover?

The lion was not in the least bit alarmed. It peered down the slope at me with obvious curiosity. It gave no sign of getting up and running away. So I took my time. I looked around to see if I could find the second lion. Nothing!

One lion was better than none!

I raised my rifle slowly to my shoulder and placed the bead across the bridge of the lion's nose. The recoil kicked viciously against my shoulder and the impact of the bullet punched the big cat's head backwards.

That's all I recall about the killing of the first lion.

What happened next took less than ten seconds start to finish.

The instant the rifle boomed the second lion erupted from the side of the first one. It came at me in an immediate, full blown, charge. I did not even see the first lion falling onto its side although I knew, instinctively, that I had killed it.

I was shocked by the unexpected and terrifying change of circumstances. My mind was now totally focussed on the unnerving charge of the second lion. It came racing down the slope like an express train, chuntering to itself all the while, loudly and gutturally. Its bright yellow eyes bore into mine, unwavering, venomous.

The hair on the back of my neck and along my arms erected instantly. My mouth dried up in a flash and the nerves in my crotch cramped and writhed quite out of control. The lion's intention was obvious. The menace in its eyes was enough to put the fear of God into the devil himself. My body was shaking like a leaf.

I ejected the spent shell and jacked another round into the breech. That action took just a fraction of a second. All over my nerves were tingling. My face blanched. Instant coldness swept across my brow and cheeks.

By the time I had the butt of the rifle back on my shoulder the lion was at the bottom of the storm drain. Its eyes were focused on me with an electrifying tenacity. It was much too close for comfort but I dared not panic. I did not have time to panic. I did not have time to even *think* of panicking. Everything was happening so very fast. The tables had been turned far too precipitously for any comprehension of the very real danger that I was in to really sink home.

The shock of the unexpected and sudden attack was just too great a

reality for my body to ignore. The animal in me began to function. All the natural and intrinsic mechanisms that prepares one for *'fight or flight'* burst into operation. Instinctively my hunter training became operative. I clutched at my wavering nerves pulling them forcibly together. Fear I had aplenty, yes, but I now had it under control.

My soul, during those few fleeting moments, was floating in a state of hiatus. The thought flashed through my mind: *This isn't really happening to me!*

The lion leaped upwards out of the gutter, launching itself directly at me. The closer it got the bigger it became. It was huge. Its golden yellow eyes never left mine. If it got hold of me I knew I hadn't a snowball's hope in Hades of surviving the mauling that would follow. I had an overwhelming desire to turn and to run... and to run.... and to run.... and to run. But running would do me no good. At that moment death stared me in the face. I had no option. I *simply* had to stand and face it.

The lion was a difficult target for the great cat was careering towards me in giant leaps and bounds. I tried aiming for the brain but abandoned the idea immediately. There was just too much vertical movement – upand-down – in the animal's head. I dropped my aim. The lion was no more than five yards from me – coming at me as fast as it could move – when my bullet hit it square in the chest.

The monster cat faltered. It stumbled but it came on. It raced across the intervening space in a flashing instant. I scrambled to one side, feverishly working the rifle's bolt. At the same time I scuttled backwards trying to get out of the lion's way.

When the lion reached the road it tripped, unexpectedly and suddenly. It fell to the ground, onto its nose, right at my feet. It rose groggily, staggering forwards, still attacking. Its head, snarling and snapping at my midriff, slipped narrowly passed my stomach as I twisted away. Its teeth had missed their mark but its lurching shoulder bumped against my hip sending me flying. Somehow, I stayed on my feet. I hung onto my rifle trying desperately to remain facing my foe. At such close quarters I could have been clawed to the ground and mauled at any moment.

The animal was hard hit but it was not going down and the last thing I wanted was to turn my back on a wounded lion. Anything could still happen. My nerves were very much on edge but I was now much more under control than I had been just an instant in time before. My shot into the lion's chest

had turned the tables in my favour.

Suddenly, the lion began chasing its tail like a demented dog. Round and round it ran... growling.... and growling.... and growling. The deep resonance of its hoarse anger seemed to come from the very depths of its belly. I was whip-lashed by the lion's tail several times before I was able to shuffle still further away, backwards,

Regaining my balance I opened the breech and rammed the bolt home. With another round up the spout my confidence returned. But it was not over yet. So fast and so violent were the lion's contorted, twirling movements, I was unable to place an accurate shot into a vital organ. And I was not going to waste the round I had in the rifle's breech by firing blindly into that whirling body. I had no wish to be attacked with an empty rifle in my hands. I was all the time very conscious of the fact that I was still within one swiping reach of the lion's paw! So I stood my ground and I waited for the lion's wild gyrations to stop. All it needed to finish the job now was one well-placed bullet into the brain.

All this action had happened in the blink of an eye.

Why did I not run backwards away from the lion? There was no time!

All that was happening was happening far too fast for me to do anything but react, and to react instinctively, to the circumstances as they unfolded.

I was standing now no more than six feet from the twirling lion. My rifle muzzle followed every twist and every turn of the animal's bewildering merry-go-round. I waited patiently for the expected moment when the animal would collapse onto the ground. And the more I watched it, the more I marvelled at the lion's great size.

The top of the lion's shoulder came up to a level above my navel. Its tail, at the root, was as thick as my forearm. My gathering senses noted other things. There was a huge and jagged tear mid-way down the animal's back. It was my bullet's exit wound. That fact will give you some idea of the angle at which the lion launched its final bounding attack out of the ditch.

I noticed a new vacancy in the lion's eyes. It was no longer concerned about me. Nor did it seem interested in anything else either. It was dying! This realisation boosted my confidence. But the big cat wasn't finished yet!

Suddenly the lion reared up, standing on its back feet, right in front of me. It held its huge paws outstretched on either side of its shoulders, baring all its claws. It ignored me completely. At that stage I don't think it even registered that I was standing so close alongside it. It reached over its

shoulder with its head, gnashing its teeth and roaring loudly, as it tried to bite the site of the pain where my bullet had come out of its body.

I cannot tell you just how big that lion was as it stood, reared up on its hind feet, right in front of me. It towered more than a yard above my head. Its huge forelegs were thicker than my thighs. Each outstretched paw was bigger than both my hands, finger's splayed, put together. Its torso was bigger than that of a large donkey. And the deep resonance of its roars reverberated to the very core of my wildly beating heart.

I shot the lion full in the chest at a range of about six feet from the muzzle. The heavy bullet punched the huge beast backwards. It fell onto its side in the middle of the road.

Not yet beaten, the lion bounced to its feet and raced off diagonally across my front, passing me by within hand-touching distance. It raced back through the storm drain and headed for the forest edge. I had one last chance to kill the beast before it disappeared into the gusu. I had one round left in the magazine!

The bullet caught the lion behind the left shoulder. It passed through its lungs before smashing the bones of the right shoulder beyond. The lion collapsed but it was still not dead. It lay writhing in the short wiry grass that had hidden it so effectively just ten seconds before. I pulled a single round from my cartridge belt and quietly fed it into the breech. I shot the lion in the head the next time its head reared drunkenly above the grass.

That last shot brought to an end the most memorable lion hunt of my career.

* * *

Horse patrols remained one of my regular duties and they were a constant joy to me – except that when I was patrolling on horseback I was not hunting.

In July of 1962 Bruce received reports of a poaching gang from Botswana that was allegedly about to enter the park on horseback and on foot, and with pack donkeys to load their benghisa-ed meat. There were no roads on our side of the border so I was despatched to investigate on horseback.

It was a bad year and a bad month for *anybody* to venture out on horseback. The rains had failed early and the veld was very dry. Nearly all the ephemeral pans had by then dried out and the borehole pumps had been started at the beginning of April. That could only mean one thing. There was little grazing near any pan that contained water in July. Still, Bruce insisted

that I go.

I never knew where Malindela got his information but his predictions about what we would find had always, so far, been accurate. I think he had a contact in Botswana who passed this kind of information on to him but, if he had, he never spoke of him. He told me the poaching gang had not yet entered the park but that they would do so very soon. He could not tell me much more than that, and he had no idea where they would be crossing the international boundary line. All he could tell me was that they would be coming into the park somewhere between Nqwasha pan and Nemtungu. That line spanned forty or fifty miles of the driest and meanest part of the border with Botswana, along its entire length.

We camped the first night at Guvallalla, where there was fresh water from the pump but absolutely no grass. My target the next day was Nehimba Springs seep, halfway from Guvallalla to Shumba. Shapi Pan, twenty miles further along the tarmac road from Guvallalla, had a borehole with a diesel engine but we could not camp at Shapi. Shapi was just too far away from our next day's destination which was Shakwanki Seep. Shakwanki was just twenty miles from the Botswana border.

Half-way between Guvallalla and Shapi I called a halt. For an hour we let the horses out to graze. We called in at Shapi and replenished our josaks, then we carried on to Nehimba. We stopped again in the afternoon to graze the horses. The two middle of the day grazing sessions forced a very late arrival at Nehimba. We set up camp at dusk.

Stopping to graze the horses in the middle of the day, when we were far from water and where grass was available, was the only way we were going to get this patrol done without completely knackering the horses. We could also not keep up such long-haul daily trips. The distance from Guvallalla to Nehimba Seep was twenty-five miles. The distance from Nehimba to Shakwanki was just as long. Covering those kinds of distances every day would kill the horses before we were half-way through the exercise. Fifteen miles was a good day's trek on horseback. Twenty was acceptable – at a push. Twenty-five was too much – especially in July.

We reached Shakwanki very late in the afternoon on our third day. It had been a long, long haul from Nehimba. En route we stopped for two hours to graze the horses. That evening, the horse and both the mules were given a double ration of crushed mealies to make up for the lack of grass.

By the time we had set up camp at Shakwanki I knew this was going to be tough patrol. By then the callous across the top of my bum was well established and sore.

There were two big bull elephants standing next to the age-old Shakwanki wells which the elephants had dug with their trunks over many years. We chased them off and retrieved water from the wells for the horses and for our camp. My canvas splash bath became the horses' water trough. Kitso upended himself into one of the wells and stretched down with the horse's crushed-mealie-ration tin in his hand to get water from the bottom – so deep was the water under the sand.

That night I went to bed dirty. There was not enough water to have even my normal small splash-bath.

Small groups of big elephant bulls came onto the dry surface of the seep after dark. I lay and watched them from my camp bed as they stood, taking their turn, sucking up the underground water with their long trunks. There were still elephants there, silently waiting their turn, come the dawn. There was no sign of any cows and calves. There was no room for cow elephants or their young at *this* waterhole. The smaller elephants' trunks were just not long enough to reach the water that lay far beneath the sand.

That night my camp bed was right out in the open. There were no trees anywhere near the wide and flat expanse of the ancient seep. I lay for hours watching the silent and ghostly comings and the goings of the big elephant bulls in the moonlight. There were a myriad stars in the blue-black heavens. The ambience was idyllic.

There were no mosquitoes but my net still hung from its customary pole above and behind my head. Not having the net festooned over my bed gave me a better view of the veld and of the animals all about me, and of the bright stars high above.

Jackals howled all night long. There was the occasional snigger from a hyena. Not one single lion voiced his opinion. In the early hours of the night the nocturnal birds were vocal. A giant eagle-owl grunted intermittently from the distant teak forest well into the night. I lay and listened to them all, happily, as I slowly subsided into a deep and untroubled sleep.

We only had one fire that night because there was very little dead wood around the seep. Because we had arrived late, the trackers had had very little opportunity to seek firewood further afield. I just knew, however, that we would not be troubled by lions because there was no surface water available

to them.

Sometime during the night I was disturbed when something prickly crawled over my face. My hand automatically slapped at it, to sweep whatever it was off me. I awoke fully when I felt a wetness coursing over my right eyelid. I wiped the liquid off on the bed sheet. It was all that there was immediately available. Then the burning started.

Long before it was dawn I was in agony. Ben and Mbuyotsi, upon hearing me walking about, got up to see what the matter was. They stacked up the fire and saw that my right eye was swollen and distorted. They boiled some water and I washed my face with soap and hot water. It didn't help. Nothing helped.

The trackers concluded that my assailant had been a cantharides beetle – otherwise known as a blister beetle, or Spanish fly. They are long thin beetles, about the size of my little finger, with a blackish-blue iridescent carapace over their wings. Their feelers are black and long and thin. So are their legs. It is from the cantharides beetle that the famous Spanish Fly aphrodisiac is made. They are very common in Hwange and I was sure the trackers were right – that the culprit was one of *'them'*.

Come the dawn I was fully dressed. Sitting hunched up on my bed. I was feeling miserable and my eye was swollen, aching and burning like you can't imagine. But I had no medicine to fix the problem. I was going to have to just grin and bear it.

Mbuyotsi came over to me from the horses. *"Mahohboh,"* he said to me quietly.

I was slowly getting used to the Bushmen addressing me by new honour name. It was strange at first, but nice. I liked them for using the name, privately and with respect, when they did. It didn't happen often. Even the Bushmen themselves were not yet comfortable using the name.

"Yes, Mbuyotsi," I answered. *"What is it?"*

"Nkosana," he said, *"Turk is sick."*

"Sick...?" I queried. *The horse is sick? Shit,* I thought to myself. *That is all I need.*

Turk, I decided after I had examined him, had a serious bout of colic. It could be nothing else. We had pushed the horses too hard the day before! It was a lesson that I never forgot.

There was no ways Turk could carry me today. I knew that what he needed was salt and light exercise. I had the Bushmen collect more water for

the horse and both the mules. I fed my entire salt supply to Turk.

We set off for Tamasanka Pan just at the break of dawn, cutting away at an oblique southerly angle, from the track that started at Shakwanki and went directly to Nqwasha Pan right on the border. (The “q” in Nqwasha is pronounced with a loud click.)

The international boundary between Rhodesia and Botswana along the Hwange border, extended from the Nata River, through the ancient pans of Zibannini, Nemtungu, Tamasanka and Nqwasha, and thence on to Pandamatenga. From there it carried on north-westward to Kazungula on the Zambesi. The reason the border passed through all these pans was to enable the travellers-of-old, on both sides of the border, to have access to water on their journeys to the north and south.

Mbuyotsi and I had agreed there was no real need for us to go to Nqwasha Pan. Travelling from Shakwanki to Nqwasha – as Bruce had suggested – and then on to Tamasanka, involved a whole day of extra travel. Moving from Shakwanki direct to Tamasanka cut across the corner – and we would not miss out on the route that any poaching gang would have to follow to enter deep into the park. So our destination that day was Tamasanka.

Our task, from Shakwanki onwards, was to look for the spoor of a poaching caravan with horses, donkeys and hunters on foot.

The spare donkey, that morning, carried Turk’s saddle and bridle. I walked ahead of the horse leading it by a buffalo riem attached to its halter. I wasn’t feeling very well myself and my eye was very painful, but I soldiered on following Mbuyotsi who was walking in the lead. He carried the old bull-barrel Winchester over his shoulder

Mbuyotsi said he knew the way but, in retrospect, I now know he was looking either for the once well-demarcated and bulldozed international boundary line, or he was looking for a major elephant path that would lead him directly to Tamasanka Pan. I knew, from having examined the maps of Hwange earlier that week that he was going in the right direction.

We again allowed the horses to graze for two hours in the middle of the day. Then we pushed on, Mbuyotsi leading the way.

Nightfall found us somewhere in the middle of the bush deep inside Botswana. I later concluded that we had come to the bulldozed line and, because it was overgrown with mopani scrub, none of us had recognised it for what it was. So Mbuyotsi had pushed on into Botswana looking for the boundary line that we had already crossed.

We camped in bare mopani woodland that night, without water. I shot a duiker at the Bushmen's request. It was the only animal we saw that day. The trackers hand-squeezed its stomach contents, saving the juices in one of my aluminium cooking pots. When they had extracted what fluids they could, they drank the tart green liquid, sharing it one mouthful at a time. And that is about all they got – one mouthful each. Not wanting to waste anything, the trackers benghisa-ed the duiker's meat.

I opened two mini-tins of green peas that night and drank the juices in which they had been preserved. Then I ate the peas themselves. That is all the food and fluid I had that day. Ever since, whenever I open a tin of green peas for supper, I first drink the juices down.

The horse and mules ate their crushed mealies that evening but there was no water. The donkeys stood around at their tethers as they always did. They had no supplements and the lack of water did not seem to affect them.

By the next morning my eye was feeling better and Turk was more perky. But he still wasn't well. So I again led him by the halter throughout our meanderings that day.

Mbuyotsi, Ben and I discussed our predicament whilst the horses were grazing. We all three agreed we must be *somewhere* inside Botswana. So Mbuyotsi, at my insistence, started to move in a north-easterly direction. That, we all presumed, would take us to the border. But neither Mbuyotsi nor I, nor Ben, nor any of the other trackers, really had any idea where we were. We were, in reality, hopelessly lost.

Mbuyotsi told me that what we really needed was to find a major elephant path. If we could stumble upon an elephant path, he said, it would lead us to one of the major pans on the international boundary. When elephants make paths they do so for a purpose. They do so because elephant paths take elephants to water in the dry season. Finding an elephant path, therefore, was our best option if we wanted to find water.

That night we again endured a dry camp. That night none of us had any liquids to drink.

On the morning of our third day out from Shakwanki everybody, and all the animals, were looking very dejected. We would *have* to find water today, I knew, or we would die of thirst in the bush. My mouth, at dawn, was paper dry. My lips were crisp and cracked. The prospect of us all dying was very real.

My eye was feeling decidedly better and Turk seemed to have returned to

his normal self. So I saddled the horse up and I rode him that morning. Despite his lack of water over the last two days, the horse felt remarkably strong between my legs.

At ten o'clock that morning we were trudging along in single file through some thick but leafless mopani trees when we were suddenly attacked by a huge elephant bull. He came out of nowhere and he came at us head on and full bore. Short, sharp, chuntering trumpet sounds ushered from his throat.

The horse shied and I nearly fell off. When Turk had steadied himself I leapt off the saddle and ran for Mbuyotsi. He was already running towards me, his outstretched hands offering me the old Winchester. I grabbed it and whipped the safety catch off. I could hear Turk galloping off into the mopani trees behind me. The elephant came on, rushing straight at us, ferociously.

The side of his head seemed to be all swollen and there was a deluge of fluid running down the side of his face from one of his temporal glands. I immediately thought he had been wounded by a bullet and, for years, I believed this to be the case. I now know I was wrong. This was an elephant bull in full musth and he was game to take on anything and everything on that got in his way or annoyed him.

At fifteen yards I fired a shot through the top curl of his left ear, and immediately reloaded. I had time enough still to place a bullet into the animal's brain – just time enough to fire one accurate shot.

I had no wish to kill this elephant. I was conscious of the fact we were still inside Botswana and my killing this elephant might spark off an international incident. I could just see the headlines*: Hwange game ranger shoots elephant across the border in Botswana.*

The bullet cut a long groove across the top of the elephant's ear. This caused it to throw its head up high. It also swung away to its left, abandoning its attack, and it rushed past me at no more than five paces. I kept my rifle to my shoulder. I had my sights trained on its brain as it rushed past. Then, just as quickly as the excitement had erupted, peace returned. And, in the distance, we could hear the elephant crashing through the mopani trees as it made good its escape.

Mbuyotsi looked at me and shook his head. *"Haaaiieee..."* he exclaimed. *"Eeesss faaahnie." There we go again,* I thought. *Funny? I didn't think what had happened was funny at all.*

Ben and Kitso had managed to hang onto the mules as they shied away

from the elephant. The animals had bucked and jumped around when the attack took place, trying to shed their loads. They had swung sideways as the elephant rushed passed them, their eyes wide and their chests heaving. The donkeys had scattered, two managing to lose their packs. Turk was gone.

Mbuyotsi went off to track down Turk. Kitso held onto both mules whilst Ben went to assist the two Bushmen at the back. It took us about fifteen minutes to gather the entourage together and to secure and check the saddles and the packs. Then we had to wait for Mbuyotsi to return.

Mbuyotsi came back to us through the mopani trees, yet another fifteen minutes later, having tracked the horse down and caught up its reins. He was riding Turk very competently. Only then did I realise that he had probably been riding horses all his life.

When we were all together I replaced the cartridge I had used with another from the extra ammo I carried in my mule's pack. I pushed a fresh round into the chamber and put the safety catch on. Then I handed the weapon back to Mbuyotsi.

We searched and found the empty shell from the shot I had fired. I put it into the little coin pocket of my short trousers for disposal down the next antbear hole we came across. I was leaving no evidence of the fact we had even fired a shot.

> *It was only then that I realised what a fool I had been. I should have shot the elephant because we would have found lots of water in its stomach. That water could have made the difference between life and death. But it was too late for recriminations. The elephant had come – and it had gone. It had been a golden opportunity that was now lost.*

We had lost more than thirty minutes in the day but that couldn't be helped. The elephant attack had been a flash in the pan and it had livened up our minds when they we going rancid. Just thinking about that elephant attack – its sudden eruption and its remarkably short duration – left me breathless. As I sat in the saddle I thought about it for a while and ended up just shaking my head. It had come and gone like the flurry of a brief but fierce whirlwind. So I let go of the memory and I stopped cursing myself for not shooting it. Instead, I concentrated on looking at Mbuyotsi. He was walking along ahead of me as if nothing had ever happened.

Presently Mbuyotsi stopped. He was not far ahead of me so I pulled Turk to a stop too. The tracker picked up something from the ground and examined it minutely. He turned round and walked back to me, handing up to me in the

saddle what he had picked up from the ground.

It was mud. And it was soft and pliable like putty!

Mbuyotsi looked at me and he smiled. It was the first time in two days I had seen him smile. *"That elephant had just come from water,"* the Bushman confirmed what I had already deduced. *"If we back track it we will come to water."*

"And its tracks?"

"*They are here,"* Mbuyotsi said, pointing ahead of us.

"Let's go then," I said happily. *"Let's go get to that water."*

Mbuyotsi smiled at Ben, who was standing some distance behind me, holding his mule by its bridle. He spoke to him in their Bushman language. *"Hah!"* I heard Ben exclaim. I saw him smile, too. Ben then turned to Kitso behind him, and he relayed the message. Suddenly the whole patrol was in a tangibly more buoyant mood. It seemed we were not going to die in the bundu after all.

Well after midday we reached the pan where the elephant had drunk that morning. It was Nemtungu, right on the international border. In our wanderings through the wilderness we had missed Tamasanka completely.

Nemtungu was a disappointment. The pan was forty yards across and it comprised a flat puddle of liquid mud. Lumps of elephant dung were dotted all over its surface. They looked like raisins in a pudding pie. There was a dead buffalo bull lying in the mud at one side. Green and yellow stomach juices fanned out from its mouth onto the surface for a distance of at least ten feet. I guess it had been dead for about a week. A distinct tang of animal urine rose off the surface of the water.

I climbed wearily off Turk and joined Mbuyotsi at the water's edge. He was running his fingers idly through the thin film of clear warm water that still covered the surface mud. It was barely half an inch deep. *Thank God for small mercies*, I said to myself. Then I looked at the buffalo and wondered just how safe it was going to be to drink this water.

Turk didn't bother with such niceties. He went straight to the edge of the pan, saddle and bridle still in place, and he started to noisily slurp up the warm surface water. Ben and Kitso led the mules to the water. They sniffed at it, hunched their backs, and started to drink, too. Every one of the five donkeys we had with us that day sniffed at the water and turned away without drinking. They were made of sterner stuff.

"Let's make camp," I urged Mbuyotsi. *"Let's get the horses out to graze."* There was precious little grazing about but I knew the animals would find *something* to eat.

Whilst the boys were setting up our camp and getting a fire going, I came to the pan with two aluminium cooking pots and a tin mug. I gently pushed the smallest of the pots into the mud right up to its hilt. Then I pushed its rim gently below the surface water, enough to let the top halfinch of clear water flow into it. When this pot was full of water I carefully and repeatedly filled up the tin mug from the sump I had thus created, and I decanted the water into the bigger pot. When the big pot was full, I took the water back to the fire where Ben boiled it for all of us.

We each had one mug of tea – taken from my own food supplies – liberally sweetened with sugar. When I added a spoonful of powdered milk to the tea it immediately curdled and floated on the surface. The brew tasted vile but it was wet and that is all that really mattered. Our bodies were parched and none of us could get enough fluid into our bellies fast enough to satisfy our need for rehydration. I insisted that none of us should drink any of this water unless it had been boiled.

Very soon every available pot in the camp was filled with water from the sump I had made, and it was boiled on the hot coals of the kitchen fire. That night we had stiff mealie porridge for the first time in three days, and we ate strips of dried duiker meat that the trackers had saved. The Bushmen were all very satisfied with the varied *isishebo* relishes that I contributed from tins in my mule pack supplies. Just on dusk, we all sat round a big fire together and we packed our bellies to capacity.

After supper I filled my tin mug with cool boiled water and added some concentrated orange juice. The orange, like the milk, curdled immediately it hit the water. It, too, tasted terrible but it was liquid and I drank it all deep down into my tummy.

Ben, Mbuyotsi and I had a round table discussion that night about the purpose of our patrol. We concluded that the conditions for hunting on horseback, at that time, were simply too severe to attract a major poaching party from Botswana. And the purpose of the patrol was not worth the risk of losing either one of us, or one of the horses, to thirst.

Malindela's information, on this occasion, must have been faulty. We decided to abandon our task and return home. The best and easiest way to do that, from Nemtungu, was the long way round by way of Zibanini, Lebuti,

Madundumela, Linquasha One and Nengasha pans. At least, on that route, we were assured of water. Taking the shortest route home, through the middle of the park, was dicey. The central parts of the park were completely devoid of water in July.

We slept better that night because our bellies were full and our bodies rehydrated, but it was not a happy or carefree camp.

Zibanini Pan was about twenty-five miles south-east of Nemtungu and there, the Bushman assured me, we would find water. Zibanini supported a big Bushman settlement just across the border in Botswana, and the community there was served by a government borehole. So, if push came to shove, we could always move into Botswana and get water from the borehole.

We arrived at Zibanini the next day at noon. What a relief it was to find the pan half-full of muddy but drinkable water. At dusk a number of scrawny cattle visited the pan, herded by Bushman piccanins.

The previous three days had been tough on us all, especially on the horses, so I decided that the next day was going to be a *Sunday*, a day of rest. We therefore made plans to spend two nights here instead of one. The Bushmen were happy. It meant they could to go visiting friends and relatives in the nearby Bushman settlements. I insisted, however, that *everybody* had to be back in camp before dusk on both evenings. We could not leave the horses at the mercy of the local lions and hyenas just because everybody was on a *fagash*.

On both nights the lions and hyenas left us alone but this was not the case with the elephants. The cow herds shied away from Zibanini because of the large numbers of Bushmen who daily frequented the pan. Human scent was everywhere about – a constant *'no-no'* for cows with baby calves at foot. This did not worry the big bulls who came and went, right passed our camp, throughout both the nights we spent there. Their constant presence was a perpetual disturbance.

One or two buffalo bulls came down to the water, from the game reserve side, but they did not trouble us at all. We knew they were there because we heard them grunting quietly at the water's edge. * * *

It was on the first of these nights at Zibanini that I asked Ben about the huge cleft in his forehead above his left eye. How did he get it?

Ben, Mbuyotsi and I were sitting around the camp fire that night, watching the flames playing over the red hot coals. Ben looked at me when I

spoke to him. He said nothing. Then he looked back into the embers. A smile tickled the corners of his mouth. He was remembering how it happened. Finally he shook his head quietly.

"I'll tell you," Mbuyotsi offered impishly.

"Haaaieee..." Ben remonstrated immediately, looking at Mbuyotsi in annoyance. There was a frown on his face.

Ben hunched up and concentrated his attention on the fire.

"Mahohboh has asked you a question," Mbuyotsi spoke to him earnestly. *"If you are not going to answer him then I will."*

"Haaaieee..." Ben said again, shaking his head. They chattered away for some time in their Bushman language. Ben was clearly telling his friend to mind his own business, or words to that effect.

Mbuyotsi started to laugh. *"Ben..."* the tracker was insistent. *"Chelah Mahohboh!"* Tell Mahohboh

"Haaaieee..."

Mbuyotsi started to speak. He was ready to tell me Ben's secret story. Ben got up. He moved away from the fire and disappeared into the dark.

"Stop!" I said to Mbuyotsi. *"If Ben doesn't want to tell me his story then I don't want to hear it."*

"Hah!" Mbuyotsi exclaimed in mock annoyance. He turned and spoke in his click-language, into the darkness, in the direction that Ben had disappeared. For a moment there was silence. Then, out of the darkness, Ben replied. *"O.K. Wenah chelah Mahohboh." O.K. You tell Mahohboh.*

Mbuyotsi began to chortle. *"Before Ben worked at Main Camp,"* Mbuyotsi started off his narrative, *"he worked as a ganger on the railways, fixing up the chips of granite ballast that hold the railways lines and sleepers properly in their place. At one point he was based at Mukwa Siding. He lived in the compound there just beyond the water tanks...."*

One Saturday night the labourers at Mukwa were having a hell of a party and some *ma-ghirrols – ma-houries* – joined the drunken festivity. A group of whores had, in fact, been especially imported from Dett. They had journeyed in the guard's van at the back of one of the goods trains that always stopped off at Mukwa Siding on a Saturday afternoon. The goods trains stopped there to await the passing of the mail train from Bulawayo.

Ben – much younger in those days – fancied one of the girls and he started to ply her with drink. Everyone was very soon pissed out of their minds.

Ben and the girl were getting on like a house on fire when he found it necessary to wander off to the edge of the compound to relieve himself. At that stage Ben had invested a lot of booze in the lady's drunken state and he had already decided that she was going to be his for the night. The lady's affections were fickle, however, and she had immediately found another willing stallion when the first one disappeared – howsoever temporarily. When Ben got back one of his workmates had taken over where he had left off. He was furious.

No amount of cajoling or persuasion could persuade his inebriated colleague to detach from the lady that night. Ben determined, therefore, that it was time for him to take stronger measures. Leaning up against a hut wall was a ganger's shovel. It was deeper than a garden shovel and infinitely heavier, because it did not have to shift mere soil around but hard and heavy granite kernels. Taking up this weapon in his hands, Ben approached his competitor from behind, called out his name, and as the man turned round to face him, he smashed the flat bottom of the shovel's blade hard against the man's temple. That one blow knocked the man unconscious.

Ben then resumed his role as the indulgent paramour, and the lady changed her affections back to Ben.

The night wore on.

Ben's victim regained consciousness and, when he was awake enough to evaluate his options, he also looked around for a weapon. He picked up a firebrick that he found lying against the wall of a hut. It was heavy enough for his purpose and it had hard and rigid corners.

Reversing the strategy that Ben himself had used, he approached Ben from behind and called out his name. As Ben turned his head the man smashed the brick into the Bushman's face. He keeled over, immediately unconscious.

Ben lay as if dead for over an hour, the hole is his head bleeding profusely. He looked bad. A big puddle of blood had gathered on the ground near his head.

One of Ben's drunken party mates carefully examined Ben's supine body. Believing Ben to be dead, he called the coloured ganger. Finding Ben *just* alive, the ganger packed Ben onto his railway trolley and, with four stalwarts pumping on the levers, they travelled along the railway line at a breakneck speed, in the middle of the night, to Dett. The Rhodesia Railway's nursing sister in Dett, Sister Anna, the Florence Nightingale of the whole

region, attended to Ben's medical needs. She saved his life!

In Ben's absence, a riot broke out at Mukwa siding. Sides were taken based upon who the people thought was right, and who they thought was wrong – in the fight that Ben and his competitor had fought. In their drunken state, things got rough and out of hand in the fracas that followed. Lives were threatened. In the end a railway policeman at the party took over control and made several arrests.

The long and the short of the story is that Ben made a slow recovery in hospital over many months. The cleft in his skull, caused by the hard corner of the firebrick, could not be erased. It became a permanent fixture on his face.

Ben's assailant, in the meantime, went to court and was found guilty of creating a riot on Rhodesia Railways property. His sentence was a heavy fine or a gaol sentence of six months with hard labour. He did not have the money to pay his fine so he went to gaol.

Ben came out of hospital and, upon hearing that his assailant was in gaol, he went to the police station and paid the man's fine. The man was released immediately and became one of Ben's best friends. It was Ben's contention that the fight had been an altercation between the two men – that it had nothing to do with the police. So, in the end, honour was restored, and the dispute was amicably resolved long after the event.

Such was the nature of my friend, tracker and personal camp assistant, the mSili Bushman, Ben Ncube.

* * *

We left Zibanini in the dawn after our second night. We made our way back into the game reserve following the stream that flowed out of the Sehumi far away to the north. Here the veld was tall mopani woodland, not the Kalahari sand teak and msusu scrub that clothed most of the border country from Nemtungu to Nqwasha.

We passed Limpande dam at about nine o'clock that morning. Limpande was a large earth-walled impoundment. It was the only game water supply in this very extensive stretch of mopani woodland. There was no borehole at Limpande.

The water in the dam was very low. It was no better than Nemtungu had been but it was very much bigger. About one hundred elephants, two hundred buffaloes and perhaps a hundred blue wildebeest were standing around the mud puddle. Some wildebeest swam through the mud trying to find water to

drink away from the edge. A few sable were standing up to their shoulders in the mud, too, on a similar quest. There were zebra and tsessebe in the melee as well.

Right in the middle of the dam was a huge mass of barbel. The catfish were all writhing around on top of the heavy mud in the inch or so of water that remained on the surface. Floating in the water, and stuck in the mud all around were the carcasses of several wildest calves – the first victims of the drought that was to take many, many lives later in the year. The rains were not due for another four months.

It was at Limpande that I first began to feel a dull ache in my lower tummy.

We wound our way through the game herds like a snake moving through grass and we progressed towards Lebuti on the edge of the Kalahari sand country. At Lebuti we were back into the teak forest and msusu scrub.

> *In October of that year I returned to Limpande in a Land Rover. On either side of the road for the last ten miles up to the dam itself – which was then dry as a bone – I counted the carcasses of fourteen elephants and over eighty wildebeest, buffaloes and zebra. That was in just one strip approaching the dam, the carcasses being counted over an area of only about one hundred yards on either side of the road. I will leave it to my readers' imagination to determine how many other carcasses lay in the veld that year in the total area covering a ten mile radius, all around the dam.*

Lebuti is the third of the three "seeps" in Hwange. The other two being Nehimba Springs and Shakwanki. There were permanent pole-and-mud walled huts here, badly thatched with desert grass. They housed the four game scouts who were temporarily stationed here for two-month periods at a time. There was also a stout kraal (corral) at Lebuti which made the camp that night a lot easier because the horses could not run away. It still required that we sleep around the kraal, however, and that we kept our fires burning throughout the night. On the occasion of our night at Lebuti we had big trouble with lions from the early evening on. They continually tried to take the horses. In the middle of the night I woke up the resident game scouts, hauling them out of their huts, and I tasked them with two-hour night-guard-duties, each, to both protect the horses and to give us some time to sleep.

The next day we worked our way past Sitcheche Pan to Madundumela –

the boreholed game water supply I had spent the night at when I had become ‘lost’ in the park. On this day the ache in my tummy increased to a solid and heavy pain. I now knew I was in deep trouble. There was something drastically wrong inside my lower abdomen. I needed to get back very quickly but on horseback you can only go so far and so fast every day.

The next day I was in agony. Mbuyotsi and Ben were now conscious of my trouble. They had become very worried and were highly solicitous. That day we travelled from Madundumela Pan passed Linquasha No. 2 borehole and windmill. From Linquasha Mbuyotsi took us on a shortcut journey through the teak forest to Ngweshla Pan on the tourist route. I was in no condition to wonder how he had accomplished that navigational feat.

The diesel engine at Ngweshla was pumping strongly so we had good water – but there was no grazing for the horses.

It was a long, long haul that day but it was necessary. The horses had had nothing to eat. We got to Ngweshla late in the afternoon – long after the last tourist game viewing vehicles had gone back to Main Camp. There we camped for the night. I lay in bed that night and writhed in agony. My purpose had now become just to stay alive. I truly thought I was going to die. That day I began peeing pus. I didn’t sleep a wink. The pain in my lower abdomen was excruciating.

Early the following morning we cut north-westerly across the intervening teak forest from Ngweshla, on the shortest possible route, to the Kennedy vlei. This route cut out what would have been a longer journey past Kennedy No. 2 windmill at the bottom end of the Kennedy vlei. Mbuyotsi was pushing it hard, making shortcuts however and wherever he could. The horses were taking strain. I simply hung onto the pommel of the saddle and let the Bushman make all the decisions. The gusu all around was just a blur. My whole world was focussed on the knot of intense pain in my lower gut.

We had just emerged from the gusu and were moving through the tall thatching grass on the Kennedy Vlei when a tourist vehicle came travelling down the road. Mbuyotsi ran ahead through the tall and coarse thatching grass to stop the car. I was on the verge of delirium. I was not conscious of very much. The vehicle stopped and I heard Mbuyotsi talking to its driver. Turk walked on coming to a stop next to the car.

The next thing I knew I was sitting in a tourist vehicle, doubled over in pain, as we raced for Main camp. Then I was looking up at Harry Cantle’s troubled face. Then it was the face of Sister Anna in Dett. Harry was there,

too. They had my trousers open and were looking at my private parts. *"Looks like a heavy dose of gonorrhoea,"* I heard Sister Anna say. *"Where has this young man been lately?"* I remember feeling very embarrassed.

My next recollection was of me lying in a hospital bed in the Bulawayo General Hospital. I was in a large ward with lots of beds most of which were filled with other patients. I had no idea how I had got there. I felt very drowsy. I was under some kind of sedation. I remember feeling relief. The pain was no longer so bad. Either I was getting better or the drugs were suppressing the torture.

I remained in hospital for ten days and had pipes and instruments pushed into every conceivable orifice. The treatment was a painful experience but I survived.

As a young boy at Plumtree school I had contracted bilharzia, a parasite infection that many (perhaps most) young Rhodesian boys got from swimming or fishing in dams and rivers infested with water snails. Bilharzia was so common in Rhodesia, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was considered to be something of an occupational hazard.

Man is host to the adult parasite which lives, in joined pairs, lodged *somewhere* in his body. When the parasites lay their eggs the eggs travel around the body in the blood stream. They pass out of the blood into the urine, or into the faeces (depending on the species of bilharzia), burrowing through the delicate tissues of the bladder or intestines. This causes bleeding from the microscopic wounds. Sometimes secondary infections set in.

The eggs pass into natural aquatic systems where they hatch into microscopic nymph-like creatures. These nymphs enter the bodies of certain species of snail which become their intermediate hosts. They mature inside these snails and, when they are ready, they leave the snails and swim about freely in the water until they can find a human host into whose body they then enter through the skin.

I have been treated for bilharzia seven times. The old treatments were drastic in the extreme. After the last time I said enough is enough. I would rather risk dying of the disease than being poisoned by the treatment. Fortunately I have been free of infection for the last fifty years.

My problem on this occasion was that dead buffalo that was lying in Nemtungu Pan. On the day I arrived there, apparently, I must have been passing bilharzia eggs in my urine and the delicate tissues of my bladder had been covered in tiny lesions made by the burrowing-out bilharzia eggs. At the

same time the dead buffalo had been releasing vicious pathogens into the water that we drank that day. Even boiling the water had not killed all the germs so they infected me. And where did the infection go? Direct to the miniscule bilharzia lesions in my bladder. My bladder, therefore, became massively contaminated which was why I was peeing puss so profusely. And without access to even the simplest of treatments the infection went from bad to worse.

I was cleared of the infection with antibiotics and all the lesions in my bladder were cauterised. I was also given my last treatment to eradicate the bilharzia. And with a clean bill of health, I returned to duty at Main Camp none the worse for wear. It was an experience I could have done without.

All my life I have been a ridiculously fit person but, from time to time, I did suffer from the inevitable diseases that went with the game ranger's territory. Malaria was the biggest problem. I got so used to malaria I could feel it coming-on days before I was likely to be struck down. Most times I was able to treat it, before anything drastic happened. I have had minor malarial bouts more times than I can remember, and one or two heavy scenes, too. Malaria, in fact, became a suppressed disease agent in my body that I learned to live with, and it never affected me adversely in any way.

Injuries have hit me harder that any disease has ever done. Broken ribs, a smashed jaw, a broken collarbone, twisted knees and lots of bruises have hindered me more than anything else.

Perhaps it is not too late for me to keeping touching wood!

* * *

Shortly after I came out of hospital Harry had an interesting run-in with a lion.

One of the ranchers in the Gwaai River Valley had set a .303 gun trap for a lion that had been killing his cattle. He did not make a good job of it. The bullet hit the animal too far forward, smashing a shoulder bone but missing all the vital chest organs. The lion ran off wounded.

Several days later, in one of the tribal areas north-west of Dett village, the wounded lion killed a cow late one afternoon. It was chased off by the villagers who – not having time then to benghisa the meat – gutted the carcass and covered it with thorn bushes. They left two openings for the lion to use, should it return and try to get at the meat during the night. In each of those two openings the villagers set a steel cable snare. Each of the snares

was fastened securely to a different tree next to the carcass.

The lion, which was badly incapacitated, being able to walk on only three legs, came back in the middle of the night. It went into one of the openings and walked right through the one snare. The noose tightened not around the animal's neck but around its body. The lion, realising there was something wrong backed out of the opening and tried to walk away. The snare tightened around its torso just behind its front legs.

The lion fought the snare all night long, voicing a huge hullabaloo that rang all around and through the nearby villages. Nobody ventured out of their huts in the night. Come the dawn, the boldest people came out first and began shouting across the valley. Everybody wanted to know what was going on. Was it, perhaps, safe for the women and children to leave their sleeping huts?

The lion, at that stage, was lying quiet having exhausted itself fighting the cable all night long. The big cat was still attached to the tree via the cable. What nobody realised was that the cable was old and rusted, and that the lion had been worrying it back and forth for hours during the night. Many of the rusty steel strands had thus been broken. So whilst the lion was lying quiet in the dawn nobody knew that it was only still attached to the tree by just a few strands of rusted steel.

Looking at the lion from a distance, the people came to the conclusion that, even though the lion was still alive, it was *'finished'*. So they retrieved their spears from the thatched roofs of their huts and, with a pack of mangy dogs, they set off like a mini-army to spear the lion to death.

The lion lay and watched the phalanx of native men approaching. The men moved forward cautiously, slowly, hesitantly. None was quite sure that what they were attempting to do was right and proper. They shooed their dogs ahead of them with sharp tongues and with the prodding points of their even sharper spears.

The dogs walked ahead of the men – stiff-legged, growling softly to themselves, the hairs on their backs standing stiffly erect. None of the dogs raced forwards to challenge the big cat. The roars that had gone on all night long had tempered the dogs' spirits and now, in the cold light of the dawn, the smell of the lion alone was just too intimidating.

Eventually the dogs stopped – well short of the lion. The men, stumbling over the reluctant bodies of their canine assistants, stopped their advance, too. Dogs and men then stood at bay. They all looked at the lion that was lying, half-hidden behind the brush wall, watching them.

The lion was a young male nomad no more than three years old. Its tawny yellow coat still sported the shadows of its once brown baby rosettes. It carried only a short scruffy mane. But in size it was no baby. Even a three-year-old male lion is infinitely bigger than a fully grown lioness. So the men were right to be cautious. This was not an animal that any sane man, armed with just a spear, should try and play with.

The lion was lying flat on its belly looking menacingly at the men. It peered through, and from round the edge of, the bushes that the natives had placed over the cow the previous afternoon. The men could now clearly see the lion and they could also now see that it was far from dead. Only thirty yards separated the opposing foes.

The dogs were wandering around between the legs of their masters now, still stiff-legged, still growling, still not prepared to move one step closer. The men stood around in a huddle, not speaking, all equally fearful of the menace that faced them.

"It's still tied to the tree," one man pointed that fact out to the others. *"And we know from yesterday that it has one front leg broken."*

"So what do you proposed we should do," came back another's retort.

"Well," said the first man to his companions. *"It can't get at us if it is still attached to the tree. So we should be able to get close to it quite safely. Close enough to stick it with our spears."*

"Would you care to take the lead," another man interjected in mock jest. He was quite happy that anybody but himself should take charge at that moment. *"If you have the courage to kill this lion then come forward. Go ahead and show us how to do it."*

The men moved about to give the man with the brave words room to come forward. They were now all so involved with the discussion they did not see the lion gathering its feet beneath its body. It was getting ready to launch its attack.

The brave man moved to the front of the pack and, at that moment, the lion charged. It came to the end of the rusty old cable line – the end of its steel tether – and the few wires that had remained intact twanged apart. The lion, still with the cable imbedded in its flesh around its body, was now free to run wherever it wanted. It raced right into the middle of the bunch of brave warriors. They scattered in disarray with their yelping village pariahs all amongst them.

One poor man was not as quick as the rest. As he turned to run the lion jumped up behind him and gave him a heavy clout behind the head. He went flying into the ground and there he lay, inert and still. The lion stood over the man's body, looking around at the fleeing warriors. It's one front leg dangled uselessly at its side. There were spears lying on the ground all around, thrown down by the scattering men as they fled without encumbrances.

The lion growled softly – just once. Then it turned and loped off on three legs, its one front leg flapping about in an uncoordinated fashion. It disappeared into the bush a hundred yards away, and dropped down into a donga that ran across the overgrazed veld beyond.

One of the tribesmen immediately raced off on his bicycle to the Dett Police Station, ten miles away to the south. A phone call to Main Camp got Harry Cantle on his way to render assistance.

Harry arrived at the village just after midday. The villager who had been struck down by the lion had recovered consciousness. He was sitting dejectedly against the mud wall of his hut in the shade cast by the thatch overhang.

The other villagers were busy cutting up the dead cow, benghisa-ing its meat. They paid the injured man scant attention knowing that his injuries would not be ignored by the white game ranger who had arrived. They also knew that Harry would now also solve their stock-killing lion problem.

Harry first examined the man's wounds. They were largely superficial. Besides two small claw marks to his scalp there was a more serious open slash above the man's left ear. It was gaping open and had exposed his skull beneath. There was also a deep and jagged gash on the outer flesh of the man's upper right arm just below the point of the shoulder. Those two bigger wounds had been caused by the two outer claws of the lion's front paw. They had been incurred by the single strike which had flattened the man into the ground. Those readers who haven't yet grasped the size of a big lion should consider these facts. Those two wounds will give you some idea about the breadth of even a young lion's paw when its toes and claws are fully extended in an attacking swipe.

The injured man had been lucky to escape death in the lion's attack. Had it not had an energy-sapping smashed shoulder, the lion would probably have killed him.

Harry and his tracker, Johnny Mlupe, followed the tracks of the lion to

the edge of the deep erosion gulley. Harry refused to allow Johnny to follow the spoor *into* it. The bottom of the donga was ten feet below the level of the surrounding ground. All around and above its sharp edge, the grass had been cropped short like a lawn by far too many cattle and sheep, and the edible bushes had been shorn by too many goats. There was no cover outside the donga in which the injured lion could have found refuge.

The two hunters walked along the top edge of the donga, looking down along the course of its dry bottom. Half-a-mile from the village they discovered the injured lion. It was lying in a tiny patch of shade cast by a small thorn tree that was growing in the sand of the donga's dry stream bed. The lion looked up at them, pitiably, as they drew closer. It made no attempt to run away. Harry despatched it with a single bullet through the head.

Johnny Mlupe summonsed the men who were, at that point in time, preparing the meat on racks for smoking (benghisa-ing). He instructed them to carry the dead lion out of the gully to a place on the flat ground above. Harry drove his Land Rover over and the men loaded its limp body onto the back of the vehicle. He then picked up the injured man and his wife, and he returned to Main Camp. *En route*, he dropped his two passengers off at the Rhodesia Railways clinic in Dett, for Sister Anna's attention.

The trackers tanned the lion skin. When it was ready Harry spread the skin out on top of the carpet in the middle of his lounge. It was not a good trophy. It was not a particularly big lion and it had only a short scruffy mane. Even its juvenile shadow-rosettes were very clear to see. But the black scar of the cable snare-wound behind its shoulders, and the big bullet hole in its one shoulder from the botched gun trap shot, were talking points that kept many a new visitor enthralled by the stories that Harry or Betty told them about its history.

* * *

Sometime during this period I was given a cyclostyled copy of a report by a Dr. Hugh Cott, a biologist who was then studying crocodiles in Northern Rhodesia. He had attached himself to a party of commercial crocodile hunters and he had collected data on the crocodiles killed during the hunters' normal operations. In addition, he had permits to catch and to euthanize as many small crocodiles as he needed – for research purposes. With respect to the smaller crocodiles he was most particularly interested in their diet.

The smaller crocodiles, in their first year, seemed to eat nothing but

insects. They ate large numbers of insects during their second year, too. I did not know enough about ecology in those days, to understand that there are food-type differences in different habitats. I also knew *nothing* about crocodiles.

Most of the small crocodiles studied by Dr. Cott came from the big swamplands of Northern Rhodesia, where insects were probably the only major source of food for baby crocodiles anyway. That would account for the preponderance of insects in their diet. I was later to discover that crocodiles of all sizes – even tiny baby crocodiles – will eat anything that moves. But I did not know this at that time. The motivation for my interest came solely from the data that Dr. Cott had presented.

He also examined the natural breeding patterns of crocodiles. They laid, he reported, between forty and one hundred eggs at a time, depending on the size and age of the breeding female. And they bred only once a year. The average clutch size was sixty-five. Most of these eggs hatched but only one percent of the hatchlings ever grew into adults. All the others suffered one form of death or another before they reached maturity.

I became surprisingly interested in these statistics. Why I have no idea now. Maybe it was because, at that time, commercial crocodile hunting had recently been stopped in Southern Rhodesia and there was a public unease about the possibility of crocodiles becoming extinct The anti-hunting brigade were citing *'over-hunting'* as the probable cause. Their opinions, however, were based on their own emotional ideas and had nothing to do with facts. Nevertheless, I saw in Dr. Cott's figures a chance to restore Southern Rhodesia's presumed depleted crocodile populations to their original strengths.

Dr. Cott's crocodile report reminded me of the results of the entomological survey I had helped Dr. John Weir to conduct in 1961. This research concluded there was a greater biomass (weight) of insects in Hwange National Park than the combined weights of all the park's big mammals.

My logic was simple. In my innocent and youthful enthusiasm, I thought I had the solution to Southern Rhodesia's apparent lack of crocodiles. All you had to do to get more crocodiles was to collect crocodile eggs from the wild, hatch them in captivity, and rear them on the insects that clearly abounded. It would only be necessary, then, to protect the growing crocodiles from predation until they had reached a big enough size to be released safely back

into the wild.

In my mind, baby crocodiles would be easy to feed. All you had to do was to erect lights over their rearing ponds and the insects would come flocking in. There were, of course, huge flaws in this simplistic solution but I was only to find that out a little later in my life.

I have dropped this little snippet of information in here because it was to have huge implications in my contribution to wildlife management in the not too distant years ahead.

* * *

My life was full of elephants and buffaloes, and lions and leopards, and horse patrols too.

Very soon after I had returned to Main Camp – after my bilharzia adventure – I was sent back down to Ngamo where a large group of elephants had broken the fence and entered the Tjolotjo teak forests south of Headman Mazai's village-line. This was the place where I had *started* my *real* elephant and buffalo hunting career with Tim Braybrooke. It was also a place where I really enjoyed hunting. It was wild and woolly country and nobody interfered with whatever it was I was doing. I rarely met another white man there. My only visitors were the likes of Headman Mazai and his family. There were no natives at all, and no white men either, living in the areas near Ngamo that I hunted.

The first day out I discovered the spoor of elephant cows and calves on the Sehumi game fence. Unfortunately, they were tracks from the day before so I didn't bother following them. Nevertheless, their discovery told me that I was going to have a lot of work to do cleaning that lot out.

I found very fresh tracks of a buffalo bull that had probably been walking on the road, and up against the fence, when it heard the Land Rover approaching. Ben picked up the spoor from his position standing on the back of the vehicle. I stopped when he shouted and we all got out to look. The spoor was *very* fresh. There was a large, fresh, dung-pat just off the road that was still wet and warm.

"Let's take this one," I suggested to the trackers. *It can't be very far off the road*, I thought, *and it shouldn't take too much time*. But we hadn't gone ten yards before the big hoof-gouges in the sand told us that it had galloped off at the high port. This buffalo had been hunted before. That meant we would have to keep our wits about us.

We climbed out of the Sehumi drainage, through the sloping msusu

scrubland, and entered the teak forest proper. I tested the wind. It was blowing from directly behind us to our front. Our quarry was racing off with the wind. We tracked on hoping the animal would turn to the left or to the right. The buffalo stopped running but it continued to walk away fast in the same direction. It was still travelling with the wind. There were no flies on this animal!

We came to several places, always in clumps of thick sinanga, where we could see that the buffalo had stopped and turned round to stand facing the way it had come. In two places it had actually lain down to rest. In every case, however, upon our approach, it had run off again down wind.

At midday I called a halt to the hunt. *"We're not going to catch this buffalo,"* I told Ben quietly. I looked at Mbuyotsi. He had heard what I had said. He shook his head. He agreed.

We each had a long slug of water from the josak that Mbuyotsi had been carrying all morning. I made a mental note to get one of Mazai's son's to accompany us on the morrow. It would be good to have one of the locals carry the heavy josaks.

Having broken off the hunt, we trudged back through the forest to the Sehumi. When we hit the fence we turned north. There was still a five mile slog up the sandy track back to the Land Rover. We were back in camp early that afternoon, empty-handed and physically exhausted.

I always felt more tired after having walked all day after some animal and not got it, than I did when I had had success even though the hunting experience might have been more energy-sapping. The very fact of success buoyed the mind and the body as much as it did the soul.

That night, as I sat at the camp fire, looking down at the purple flames flickering across the surface of the red hot coals, I decided I was not really disappointed at the day's failure. Today we had been chasing a rainbow, a rainbow that did not want to get caught. *It was good to sometimes not have a successful hunt,* I thought. We were experiencing success in more than nine hunts out of ten. It was good for your own selfdiscipline to walk and to run all day long without getting a result.

As I thought these thoughts I had to smile. The smile turned to light banter. Ben and Mbuyotsi heard me chortling and they looked at me askance. So did the young Bushman camp skivvy we had brought along to guard the camp. Mbuyotsi bumped him with his elbow and signalled that he should stop listening to the big people. He should get on with what he was supposed

to do.

I had laughed to myself because I had suddenly realised I was starting to think like an old man – like someone who was an old hand at the hunting job. Only older people, I surmised, accepted failure in their stride. Young hunters, like me, wanted and needed success – and they wanted it every time they went out hunting. I was *still* a young hunter. I decided I would have to mend my ways. At aged twenty-two, I was not yet old enough to accept a day of failure with such equanimity.

That evening Mbuyotsi drove over to Mazai's village in the government Land Rover and he secured the help of one of the headman's sons for tomorrow's hunt.

I had known that Mbuyotsi knew how to drive so I had started to use him for such simple tasks of late. He didn't have a driver's licence and he wasn't all that competent, but he did know the rudiments. Where he had learnt to drive I didn't ask. But I had decided to let him polish his skills with little jobs like this, where he could really do no harm. And he wasn't a hair-brain. Furthermore, I was always conscious of the fact that, one of these days, I may have need of his driving abilities should I, or somebody else, be badly injured in a hunting accident.

The following day, on the Sehumi, we got onto the last night's tracks of the elephant cow herd we had seen the day before.

I dropped both Bushmen off to check out the scene whilst I parked the Land Rover in the shade of a lone camel thorn tree up against the fence. I then walked back the intervening one hundred yards to join them.

"*Zinghaki?"* I asked Ben when I came up to him. *How many?*

He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. *"Anghaazi..."* he answered lazily – noncommittally. *I don't know! "I am still looking." "Twenty – twenty-five,"* Mbuyotsi volunteered immediately. *"And there are some big bulls in amongst them."*

"So there is a cow in oestrous?"

Mbuyotsi nodded and he smiled at me mischievously.

"Eighteen – twenty," Ben said at my side. *"There are eighteen to twenty in the cow herd and three big bulls".*

Ben, taciturn and introverted though he was, always gave me as near to the most accurate figures that he could determine. Between the two trackers I now had a good idea what we were up against.

"Nienie?" I asked Ben succinctly. When were they here?

"Langa yena tjshona zolo," Ben answered immediately. *When the sun set yesterday afternoon.*

Mbuyotsi didn't argue the point. He hitched the 9.3 mm Mauser he was carrying more comfortably over his shoulder, his right hand covering the pistol grip. I never allowed the trackers to carry weapons over their shoulders with their hands around the muzzle. Sweaty hands stripped off the barrel-bluing. It made the steel shine like silver. Easy damage that was ugly and expensive to repair.

I looked at my watch. It was just after half-past-seven in the morning. Fourteen or fifteen hours separated us from the elephants.

I tested the wind. It was static.

"Will we catch up with them?" I asked the trackers.

"Maybe..." Ben answered hesitantly. He too knew that fourteenhour-old spoor was a very long interval of time. *"Yes,"* he then affirmed more positively. *"They are cows and calves. They won't walk as far as the big bulls do. And they may take us to where they are drinking."* We had not yet ascertained this important factor. Where were the elephants drinking? The open pan on the edge of the Ngamo plains was at that time just a mud puddle.

"O.K. then," I said. *"Hendeyi." Let's go.*

The whole group had spent a long time feeding in the msusu scrub and in the dry grassland between the fence and the teak forest edge; and they had entered and exited the forest edge in many places. It took the trackers some time to unravel the spoor. Finally they worked it out. We set off on the tracks as they travelled east, meandering, spread out, through the gusu.

One of headman Mazai's teenage sons, carrying a full water bag in each hand, stood alongside me as I waited for the trackers to sort out the spoor. When we took off after the elephants, he tagged on behind.

I was looking forward to finding out where the elephants had been getting water this side of the game fence. There were few pans in the teak forest proper and those that did exist were dry. The rains had been poor during the 1961/62 wet season. The country was heading for a serious drought later in the year.

The elephant cow herd, as usual, had taken a leisurely stroll through the forest. The families – individual cows with their own progeny – were spread out and feeding as they moved along. We did not bother to keep tabs on the accompanying bulls. We just assumed they would be sticking close to the

cow that was in oestrous. I had already decided that the bulls were going to have to be my first targets when the shooting started.

I remembered the last hunt I had conducted in the Makona area. That one big bull, when it ran away, had split up the entire herd. So, this time, I was going to knock the big bulls down first.

Limited though my experience had been up to that point, I already knew that when you started shooting into a cow herd (in which there were no bulls), when the first shots were fired the cows all growled loudly, pulling their calves in around them. They would then look all around trying to determine just where the danger lay. By the time they had an answer to *that* question, if the hunter was a good hunter of elephants, he had all the big cows down. Then it was just a question of cleaning up the rest. Young elephants, once their mothers were down, gathered around their fallen carcasses in utter confusion – until they were killed by one of the many fast-fired bullets from the hunter's gun.

If there were big bulls present in a cow herd, however, when you started shooting you had to shoot the big bulls first. If you didn't do that, the big bulls ran away and all the cows immediately took off after them.

I was learning. I was learning all the time. It looked as though today was going to be my day for testing my newly formed elephant hunting theory. One of the reasons why I had decided to follow *this* cow herd today was because there were mature bulls in attendance amongst them.

But I was not even sure we would catch up with them. It looked as though today was going to be a long, long day of tracking.

I was wrong. We had been on the fourteen hour-old tracks for just one hour when we cut the very fresh spoor of an elephant cowherd that had come up from the south. I kicked open a lump of their dung and pressed the backs of my fingers into its centre. It wasn't warm but it wasn't cold either. It had been dropped after the dawn!

"Ipi skati?" I asked Ben. *What time? What time was this herd of elephants here?*

"One hour ago," he responded immediately. *"Njenga two." Maybe two hours.*

"Are they the same elephants?"

"Eemah." Wait a bit. Ben excused himself and started casting around, looking at the tracks. Mbuyotsi joined him.

I stood around and let them cast their spells. They both knew what they

were doing so I left them to do it.

Presently they came back to me. Both men were smiling. *"They are the same elephants,"* Ben assured me. *"There are about the same number and there are still three big bulls with them."*

We had been on the tracks for just one hour and already the fourteen-hour-old spoor had turned into two-hour-old spoor. This kind of thing happens quite often. When it does you thank your lucky stars.

The elephants had gone off to water *'somewhere'* in the middle of the night and they had spent the rest of the night eating and sleeping the hours away deep inside the gusu. I realised that we would now not find out where it was they were drinking, but I also knew I was not about to spend the rest of the day following tracks. I was happy about that.

I tested the wind. There was now a gentle drift of air blowing to the east, blowing directly across the new tracks we had just found.

One hour later we caught up with the herd. They were spread out feeding. I tested the wind. It had not changed. I looked at my watch. It was barely ten o'clock in the morning. Now was not the right time to tackle the herd. They were far too spread out. I needed them to be much closer together. We would have to wait for midday – or just a bit thereafter. We would have to give them some time to settle down into their midday rest routine. Two-to-three hours! I wanted them half-asleep on their feet and all bunched up.

I moved to the east, to a totally downwind location, and I inspected those animals in the herd that I could see. There looked to be *more* than twenty in the group. You tended to overlook the number of babies present because they were always hidden by the bushes at their mother's feet. You were inclined, therefore, to underestimate numbers. I subconsciously took that fact into account. And there were the three big bulls.

Two of the bulls were standing absolutely still. They were watching the biggest bull of them all as it fiddled with the tip its trunk low down beneath a young cow's back legs. That is where the cow's vaginal opening lay and I knew that the vulva, at that very moment, would be dribbling pheromone-rich urine to advertise the cow's condition of mating readiness.

Even as I stood watching, the big bull arranged himself behind the young cow and he lifted his fore quarters clear off the ground. He placed the pads of his two front feet onto the cow's two pelvic planes above her hips, and his trunk ran forward along her spine. She tried to move away but he held her in

place with his trunk. Then, after some shuffling, his giant penis entered her vagina and he began to pump his hips. The mating action lasted several minutes. He then dismounted and stood quietly behind her, the end of his giant penis lying limp on the ground.

After the event the young cow moved off a few yards and began eating some leaves. I was amazed at how small she was compared to the giant bull that had just served her. She couldn't have been more than one third his size.

This was the first time I ever saw elephants mating.

None of the three bulls showed any inclination to move off. So I guessed they would still be close-by when the herd went into siesta mode.

I assessed the movement of the herd and determined they were still moving imperceptibly towards the north. So the trackers and I retired to the east – to a directly downwind position a hundred yards back. There we settled down in the shade of a big mchibi tree to wait out the next two hours.

At twelve o'clock noon I walked across to where we had left the elephants feeding. They were gone. I turned and whistled softly like a lost guineafowl – facing back towards where I had left the trackers. They answered me briefly. Shortly after that they came walking through the undergrowth towards me. Behind them I could make out the slim form of our young water carrier.

"Yena hambileh," I announced to the trackers quietly when they came up to me. They have gone. *"Take up their tracks. They must be about ready for their afternoon nap by now."*

But they weren't. We caught up with them very quickly. They were still spread out feeding. The three big bulls were still with them. We again retired to the east and settled down for another hour.

At one o'clock I got up and told the trackers to pick up the tracks again and to follow the elephants. *"They must be sleeping by now,"* I announced. Half an hour later that is how we found them.

When we came upon them, all the cows were standing in a huddle in the shade of a big mchibi tree. They were on our left front. They weren't tightly bunched but close enough for my purposes. Off to one side, about fifty yards away on my *right* front, the young cow in oestrus was dozing quietly in the dappled shade of a small teak. She had a calf at foot snuggled up against her right back leg.

The very big bull was standing close to the young cow. He was still in

attendance but not now actively so. His head was drooping on weary shoulders. His eyes were fluttering. The other two bulls were behind the big bull, standing apart, about twenty yards further on. They too were dozing. They all had their noses into the wind.

I stood with the trackers about forty yards back and assessed the situation. None of the elephants had any idea we were anywhere about. I took out my ash bag. The same light breeze was still blowing gently and consistently to the east. We were standing on the southern side. The set up was perfect.

"I'm going to take out those big bulls first," I said to Mbuyotsi quietly. He looked at me and nodded. His right hand automatically came up and indicated silently that we should come in from a downwind position to our right. I had already worked that out. I nodded my head. I liked to converse with the trackers on these kinds of decisions. I encouraged them to say their piece. It made them feel part of the operation and they sometimes gave me better advice.

We retired from the elephants and quietly made our way round the big bulls and the young cow, in a big one-hundred-yard arc, to the right. This enabled us to approach the three bulls with the wind in our faces. We came up on them from behind.

I manoeuvred my position so that, as I drew within shooting range, I had the big bull to my left fore. The other two were directly on my right flank. The cow and her calf were standing further away to the left. When I was in position they were out of sight behind the big bull's huge body. The main herd was then beyond the big bull to our left front, about thirty yards away.

Mbuyotsi stood back with the 9.3 Mauser at the ready. Ben and I went ahead until we had all three of the big bulls equidistant from us at between ten and fifteen yards range. They were all dozing solidly. They knew nothing of our close proximity. I had my .458 in my hands. I hoped it wouldn't let me down. I had by then made all the necessary adjustments and repairs to the weapon. I felt confident that nothing more could possibly go wrong.

All three bulls were still all facing the same way, into the wind. They all presented me with beautiful side-head brain shots.

I decided to take out the two big bulls on my right hand side first. That would allow me to fire two shots in quick succession without me having to change my position. It was just the point of aim that would be different. I aimed for the brain of the furthest bull and squeezed off my shot.

The detonation had all the elephants suddenly wide awake. I worked the bolt and aimed for the second bull's brain. He had seen me and was sliding away to the front. He didn't go far. My bullet caught him just forward of the ear hole. He collapsed stone dead.

Reloading as I moved, I swung round to my left. The biggest bull of them all was turning round to face me. His head was up high and he was looking down at me from a startled right eye. He was moving as much forward to my right as he was swinging round onto me. I took careful aim at his moving brain. My bullet caught him in the face just to the left of the tusk socket. It angled straight backwards into the vital organ. Even as his head was swinging round to face me I never lost sight of his brain. He took an immediate nosedive into the ground.

The young cow, and her calf, began running towards the other cows. I punched my last bullet into her brain. She fell immediately to the ground.

My rifle was now empty but Ben was standing next to me with two shiny brass cartridges in his right hand. I grabbed them and stuffed them quickly into the magazine. No sooner had I done that than he handed me another two.

On each side of me now I had elephants lying on their sides kicking their top back legs in the air. When I looked up from reloading, I saw the main herd racing towards me in panic. That sight took me completely by surprise. I couldn't just stand and shoot. There were just too many elephants and they were all too damn close.

I ran behind the carcass of the big bull. His huge body gave me some immediate protective cover. Just as well. As I got behind him the whole herd burst over the killing field like a tidal wave. When they hit the four carcasses, the cows stopped and milled about the bodies.

At that stage I had a phalanx of cows and calves – the whole herd – undecided and full of panic, right in front of me. Some of them were no further than five yards from me – the length of the big bull's body.

I shot two big cows. Reloaded. Shot two big cows. Reloaded. Shot a big cow and a young bull. Reloaded.

I did not want to be caught in a charge at close quarters with an empty rifle. Ben stood stoically at my side all the time offering me spare rounds of ammunition in pairs. All the big elephants were now down. I set about killing the biggest of the animals that remained. Then came the babies. A horrible task that had to be done! To get to them all, I had to run around the heap of dead elephants to find those that I had not yet killed.

Then, just as suddenly as it had erupted, the fracas was over. Besides the three big bulls there were nineteen animals in the cowherd. Ben had been exactly right in his estimation! All that was left was a large heap of dead elephants. Every shot had been a brain shot. Four animals required a *coup de grace*.

My forearm inadvertently touched the rifle barrel. The flesh sizzled. I snatched my arm away. Too late, I was left with a long white mark of burnt skin where the barrel had scorched me. The metal was red hot.

Mbuyotsi looked at the heap of dead elephants. Then he looked at me and shook his head. *"Mahohboh!!!"* he said quietly. *"Sumbe definitely found the right name for you!"*

* * *

Sumbe was a sadist. So were all the rest of the Bushmen trackers. At different times and in different places they all exhibited some form of pitiless and callous behaviour towards those non-Bushman natives who, from time to time, came under their control. It was a quirk of their natures. I recognised it but I forgave them because I was biased. The Ndebeles and other native tribes that surrounded Hwange looked down on the Bushmen as a sub-human race and, when *they* were in control, they treated the Bushmen in a totally heartless manner. So, when the tables were turned, the Bushmen exacted retribution. Whereas I did not approve, I also understood and I took the Bushmen's side!

I was recently looking through the only old diary of those days that I still have in my possession. There was an account in it of a day on horse patrol some fifty years ago. It told the tale of a poaching gang that we had caught. It also told the tale of Sumbe's participation in the arrest and his subsequent treatment of one of our prisoners.

We were patrolling in the Nengasha, in the basalt country, area right up against the railway line. There was a coloured ganger's cottage at Nengasha and there was the usual compound that housed his native labourers. These people – the ganger's employees – were always tempted to poach the nearby game reserve that bounded on their own back yards. Their choice of weapon was the cable and wire snare – no cost, easy to make, easy to use, disposable, cruel and very effective.

Sneaking up on their villages on horseback often brought us results. On this day we discovered a snare-line inside the park about half a mile from the Nengasha railway siding.

The snares were set in gaps in a brush-line of freshly cut bushes that had been carefully arranged to form a barrier to game animals. The snarefence meandered through some tall miombo woodland in rocky terrain.

Mbuyotsi had walked onto the snare-line whilst we were still in caravan. We were *en route* towards our campsite for the night. He stopped and looked up at me on the horse behind him. He pointed silently to the line of brush and to an obvious cable snare that was set just in front of us in one of the gaps. I knew exactly what it was.

"*How new is it?*" I asked him quietly. We often found snare lines with the snares still set in place. On many occasions they had been abandoned or hadn't been visited for weeks. Any animal caught in them, therefore, died painfully and without purpose. I hated wire-snarepoachers. They were unfeeling, wasteful and without any kind of selfdiscipline.

"*Kuseni...*" *This morning*, Mbuyotsi said, picking up some fresh green leaves from the ground, leaves that looked as though they had just be plucked off the tree.

My diary records that: "*A native then jumped out of the bushes and ran away through the trees.*" I gave chase on old Turk and quickly overtook him. The poacher dodged and he dived in and out of cover. I kept him at bay with the horse until Mbuyotsi came running up pointing the old bull barrel Winchester at him, shouting at him to *'surrender'*. When the poacher saw the rifle he gave up. He sat on the ground and put his two hands up in the air. Mbuyotsi removed the handcuffs that were always coupled onto his belt. He secured the prisoner quickly with his hands behind his back.

> *It is because of this one sentence in my old diary that I have referred to the African people that I lived and worked with during these years as 'natives'.*
>
> *Simply stated, that is what we white men then called them. It implied nothing derogatory. And when I read that sentence in my old diary I decided to keep my narrative authentic and in vogue with the times. I lived and worked during this colonial era!*

We questioned the poacher and from the information we received we ransacked the Nengasha compound that same day. We raided the homes of everyone our captive had named as being his accomplices and we arrested them all. In their houses we recovered all sorts of incriminating evidence which we confiscated. We also used our prisoners to dig out the ash pits at the back of their own homes and we recovered bones, horns, skins and

hooves of wild animals that incriminated them in a much wider case of poaching.

We had to cut short our patrol at that point. We returned to Main Camp with our prisoners and our evidence. One poor donkey was packed high with the wire snares we collected from the bush, and others that we recovered from the poachers' homes.

Riding along with Mbuyotsi in the lead, I looked back at our entourage. Our five prisoners were all handcuffed and tied together in a long line with buffalo hide riems. I marvelled at how the one thing had led to another during the process of the investigation. And I wondered just when the native poachers of Africa would come to understand that the ash pits behind their houses were *not* the places to discard the unwanted bits and pieces of their illegal hunting activities. On this occasion we had found more evidence of their poaching in the ash pits than we had obtained anywhere else. All along the way, our first prisoner had a continuous altercation with Sumbe – who was on horse patrol with us on that occasion. In fact, their verbal fighting became so intense and aggravating I turned round in the saddle and shouted at the poacher to keep his mouth shut.

When we got back to Main Camp I understood the man's chagrin. As the prisoners walked along Sumbe positioned himself behind the lead poacher with the man's own spear in his hand. The point of the blade was perpetually directed at the man's left calf muscle. If the man faltered in any way Sumbe jabbed the point of the spear into the man's flesh. By the time we got back to Main Camp two days later the man was limping badly and his calf was a bloody mess. When he was confronted by the man's accusation, Sumbe just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He denied any wrong doing.

* * *

On another occasion we were on horse patrol in the eastern sector of the park. We discovered a snare line with a long-dead buffalo in one of the traps. The buffalo, complete with its death necklace, had been abandoned. But there were other, newer, snares still in position and we found the fresh tracks of the poacher who had been tending them. That day we were again camped at Tum-Tum. A lot happened for, and to me, around that pan!

We eventually arrested the poacher. He was a middle-aged Ndebele man with a big black beard. Ben tracked him for fifteen miles. The spoor led from the man's trap lines in the national park, eastward to the Sehumi, through the

game fence, and up into the teak forest beyond. It was not difficult tracking because the substrate was all Kalahari sand. Finally we arrived at an isolated village well south of Ngamo. There we searched every hut. We dug out the man's various ash pits, too, and we came away with enough evidence to put the old codger away for many months.

The man denied everything.

We arrested him all the same. It took us nearly a week to get the poacher and his katoonda, and all our evidence, back to Main Camp. By the time we got back to base he had still not changed his tune. Every evening on the way back Mbuyotsi had sat him down around our camp fires and he had questioned him minutely. I tried too. Nothing changed the man's mind. He continued to protest his innocence.

We had him cold for poaching. We had all the corroborating evidence collected from his home village. But there was only circumstantial evidence – a set of human footprints – linking his village to the snare lines inside the national park. We could not prove that the footprints we had followed back to the man's village were *his* footprints. He claimed they belonged to somebody else. I was unable, therefore, to prove *beyond a shadow of doubt* that he had caught the poached animals inside the national park.

We had arrested the man in his village in the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Land. So, unless we could get him to admit that he had poached the animals in the game reserve, we would have to charge him with snaring the animals in the TTL. There was nothing concrete linking him to the spoor. I could not charge him with snaring in the national park. For that I needed his admission of guilt; or I needed a corroborating statement from somebody else.

I wanted the conviction to include the fact that he had poached the animals inside Hwange National park. The punishment for illegally hunting in a national park was much heavier than it was for illegally hunting in a native reserve.

We arrived back at Main Camp in the middle of the day. We out spanned the horses and sent them out to graze. I instructed the trackers to take all the snares and other evidence to the workshops where it could be secured under lock and key.

Tomorrow I would deal with the case properly. I would then mark the exhibits A, B, C and D *et cetera*. I had to prepare my statement and I had to take statements from the trackers, too. When we presented any and all of our cases to the public prosecutor – who, in the case of Dett, was the member-in-

charge of the BSA Police station – he had very little else to do. We were very well trained in the preparation of court dockets. The better we presented our cases in court the better were the sentences the magistrates delivered.

Tired and saddle-weary, I retired to single quarters. There I immediately lay down on my bed. Josepha, the cook boy, set about preparing me some lunch. Just one hour from the time of our arrival back home, Mbuyotsi came to the verandah door and knocked on it loudly.

"Mahohboh," he said excitedly. *"The prisoner has admitted that he snared these animals inside the national park."* I was flabbergasted.

"What made him talk?" I asked quickly, surprised and delighted.

"Sumbe had a chat with him," Mbuyotsi said with a mischievous smile.

Sumbe? Oh No... I thought. *Now what has he done?*

Our prisoner was sitting in the shade of the workshop roof chatting to the trackers. He now seemed affable and quite unconcerned about the consequences of the admissions he had, apparently, just made. When I looked at him, however, I noticed there was something different about him. Something was not the same.

Sumbe came over to me and he said, matter-of-factly, *"The poacher now admits that he snared all the animals inside the park, Mahohboh."*

"What did you do to him Sumbe?" I asked directly. *"What did you say to him?"*

"I just asked him a few questions," Sumbe replied innocently. But there was a twinkle in his eye. I then knew for sure there was something not kosher about this whole affair.

I looked back at the prisoner, now so suddenly cooperative. Then I saw it. The man's big black beard had been considerably diminished.

"Where's his beard?" I turned on Sumbe in a flash. Without batting an eye Sumbe opened his hand. It was full of the crinkly black hairs that had once been the prisoner's beard. He had pulled the man's beard out chunk by chunk!

"Mahohboh," Sumbe then said to me quite seriously. *"You don't yet know how to properly interrogate these Ndebele people."*

The following week our prisoner happily told the court that he had killed all the animals, for which he was accused of snaring, inside the national park. He was given a six months gaol sentence with hard labour.

* * *

Sometime during the middle part of my first three years at Main Camp, I visited the Arnott farm on the Lukosi River at the request of its owner. A squadron of elephants, Mr Arnott had told Bruce, were pushing over all his big riverine acacia trees and there were a number of old buffalo bulls that he wanted removed, too. With regards the buffalo, of course, he was concerned about disease spreading to his cattle.

I camped on the western bank of the Lukosi, on the Arnott farm land. The old man had offered to have me stay in his lovely old rock-built farmhouse. I declined his hospitality, graciously, saying that I truly preferred to camp out under the trees.

That evening, just before sunset, Old Man Arnott took me to his cattle kraal because he wanted me to see his stock. He had some misgivings about what he perceived to be listlessness in some of the animals and he wanted me to advise him about *theileriosis* (corridor fever). He had a suspicion that some of his cattle might be infected. I had never seen corridor fever in cattle before so I was unable to help him. All the same, we spent some time with his sleek fat beasts as they stood quietly inside the pole stockade chewing the cud.

We also examined the elephant damage to his big acacia trees. I agreed with him, something had to be done to stop it. Had I owned that farm I would have been very angry at the elephants' wanton destruction. And, immediately, in my mind, ridding the old man of his marauding elephants became my primary objective.

Whilst Mr. Arnott and I were talking and walking about the farm together, I sent Ben out to see what he could find out about the numbers of elephants and buffalo involved. When Ben returned to camp just on dusk, he told me there were four big elephant bulls – not many, but enough to do a hell of a lot of damage. He also said there were only two buffalo bulls. Just one was enough to get any farmer worried.

Just before we parted company that evening, Mr. Arnott asked me if I would mind if his teenage son, Graeme, accompanied me on the elephant hunt in the morning. I agreed with alacrity. From what I had seen of the boy he was big enough to keep up with us and he was welcome to come along. *"You will take responsibility should anything happen to him?"* I said as my final comment.

"No problem," his father responded. *"I am sure he will be safe in your hands."*

It was settled. Young Graeme was coming on the hunt with us in the morning. *"I'll pick him up at the house when we are ready to start,"* I said before walking back to my camp.

I heard the elephants pushing down more trees during the night. I built up quite an anger as I lay in bed and listened to the tree trunks splintering.

The next morning, when the dawn broke, I lay in bed and listened to the bush around me waking up. There was a seeming myriad of Natal Francolins chattering away all up and down the river. Ground hornbills brummed in the distance. The other birdcalls were a cacophony.

I lazed away the early hours. What a luxury in these beautiful surroundings! I had worked out that I had lots of time to get the elephants – *and I wanted them all*. At six o'clock in the morning they would be spread out feeding and *that* state of affairs would be no good for my purpose. I wanted them standing all together, as they would be at midday, dozing away the hot hours in a state of torpidity. They would then be only half awake. I had a feeling these elephants were not going to go very far. They had decided the Lukosi riverine was a quiet and satisfying place to be. They were settled here, certainly for the time being. There was ample shade, lots of thick cover, good water and the grass was lush and palatable.

Nine o'clock would be a good time to begin on the elephant's tracks. Starting from such a base-time, and tracking at a snail's pace, I believed we would catch up with them about midday. There was no point in finding them all spread out and wide awake. I wanted four dead elephants today, not just one or two.

I had washed and shaved by the time Ben brought me breakfast – a rare indulgence on an elephant hunting patrol. Normally, by breakfasttime we were on the ground looking at spoor. Today was different. These elephants were somewhere nearby. They weren't going to go very far. I needed to bide my time in order to find them all *present-and-correct* at midday – ready for my expert attention.

I was half-way through my breakfast when Mr. Arnott came stomping up. Graeme was with him. The old man's face was flushed, full of fury. *"What the hell are you doing at half-past eight in the morning?"* he demanded to know. *"You should be out shooting elephants you lazy little bugger."*

I was sitting in my canvas chair my elbows on the metal camp table. I stopped eating. I looked at him angrily, my fork half-way to my mouth. I was

immediately affronted but I curbed my temper. *Who the hell did he think he was? I thought. I am not his bloody garden boy!*

"I'm going to report you to your superior for this," he stated emphatically. *"I'm going to go back to the house and phone Bruce Austen immediately."*

"You do what you like, Mr. Arnott," I told him quietly. *"But hell will freeze over before I allow you to tell me how I should conduct my business."* I continued eating my breakfast, ignoring his outburst. The old man became almost apoplectic. He looked at me aghast, eyes wide open, surprised. He was clearly taken aback by my unexpected retort.

Young Graeme stood by silently, listening and watching. He looked anxious – disappointed. His father started to say something else. He spluttered a bit then changed his mind. He turned on his heel and walked away. The boy turned to follow.

"Didn't you say you wanted to come hunting with me today," I asked the young man as he and his father were moving off.

Graeme stopped and turned back to face me. *"Yes please,"* he said hesitantly. He cast a brief and uncertain glance at his father's uncompromising figure marching away up the road.

"O.K. then," I replied. *"Come and sit down."* I gestured toward the empty camp chair on the other side of the table. *"Have you had breakfast?"*

"Yes thanks."

"Like a cup of tea? I'm going to have one."

"Yes please."

I turned and shouted at my tracker who was squatting down next to the camp fire. *"Bwisa TWO teas, please, Ben."*

I watched Old Man Arnott punching his feet angrily onto the dirt road's dusty surface as he trudged his way back home. He was angry. I just *knew* he was off to phone Bruce Austen right away. I smiled and shook my head silently.

Across the table young Graeme looked at me hesitantly. I am not sure what he was thinking but I could see he was excited. The altercation I had had with his father was not important to him. What was important was that he was coming hunting elephants with me, and the hunt was clearly about to start.

That day I was using the old Cogswell-and-Harrison .375. On the camp table, cleared of the breakfast dishes, I loaded up my belt with twenty-five

shining new brass cartridges. They came from a new batch of Kynock ammunition we had just received. There were four rounds of the old stock in the magazine of my rifle, and another was up the spout. Those five rounds were the last of the old stock. I left two full packets of ammunition on the table, one each for Ben and Mbuyotsi to carry in the breast pockets of their bush shirts.

We walked from our camp to where we had heard the elephants breaking down the trees during the night. There we picked up fresh spoor. Both Ben and Mbuyotsi confirmed there were four elephant bulls in the group. This was the demolition squad we were after.

To my surprise, the elephants had wandered off from the broken trees directly towards our camp, which they must have seen or smelt because they took a detour round it. Then they followed the riverine bush upstream.

The elephants' silent walk around our camp had happened during the middle of the night. Neither I, nor the trackers, had heard them walking past no more than fifty yards from where we were sleeping. When elephants want to, they can move with absolute silence.

The jumbos stuck to the western bank of the river. The bush was denser here than on the other side. Between two and four o'clock in the morning all four of them had found places on the sloping river bank to lie down. There they had gone to sleep.

By nine o'clock in the morning we were on spoor that was spread out. Here the elephants had fed heavily on the green Panicum grasses that grew in rank swards wherever there was an opening under the big riverine forest trees. All the time, just as I had suspected they would, they had moved very slowly through the trees. My predictions were spot on. These elephants were very happy staying close to the river and inside the forest trees that grew in mixed profusion all along the rich black alluvial soils.

We caught up with our quarry just after midday. It was hot and sweltering. The sweat was pouring off our bodies. The elephants, too, were feeling the heat. They were standing in dense shade under a huge Natal Mahogany tree right on the river bank. They were fairly close together. Just as I wanted them. The bush was not thick but there was enough cover to conceal our close approach. They were dozing heavily, rocking back and forth, and from side to side.

Just before I made my final stalk I left young Graeme some distance

behind us and told Mbuyotsi to look after him. From their position they could see the hunt take place. For some reason I only had one rifle with me that day, so Mbuyotsi had nothing to use should he be attacked by one of the elephants. But he had a good head on his shoulders. I knew they would all right.

Ben and I slowly made our way towards the elephants, moving ever closer. There were three big bulls and an altogether smaller one. My first two shots were quick off the mark. They dropped the two nearest bulls like bags of potatoes. The other two elephants took off at the high port. I ran after them and managed to get a good shot into the brain of the bigger one. He, too, dropped as if pole axed. All three of the downed elephants were dead. The smallest elephant ran off.

Ben fed me three new rounds of ammunition – two then one. I reloaded the magazine and pushed the last cartridge into the breech. I ran on. Ben ran on behind me, constantly lagging further and further behind. He couldn't keep up with my running pace. It was at times like this that Mbuyotsi was better.

After running two hundred yards I saw the elephant standing in the heavy forest foliage right in front of me. He was casting his head about from side to side, waiting and listening for one or another of the three big bulls to join him. He was not so lucky. All he got was me.

I smacked him in the face with a solid round. He careered backwards, staggering, but he didn't go down. *Damn. I had missed the brain. How had that come about?* I fired a quick second shot. This one went into his head at an angle from the front side. I could 'see' his brain quite clearly. The bullet hit home. The elephant again staggered. Still he did not go down. I rammed a third bullet into the chamber and I waited for the elephant to turn. He obliged I fired another bullet. This time it was a perfect and easy side-head shot. The elephant spun round and staggered off. I gave chase, reloading from my belt.

I fired a bullet into his spine. It missed the spinal cord and did not break the animal's back. But the strike semi-crippled him. He could now not run fast but he still staggered on. *What the hell was going on?*

Ben caught up with me. And as I fired round after round into that elephant he kept feeding me fresh ammo. *There was something wrong with the bullets! Or there was something wrong with the propellant! It could not, surely, be me?*

The jumbo was going nowhere. So, remembering that I had been constantly reloading the magazine, I realised that I might just have one of the old cartridges at the bottom of the magazine. I stopped firing and ejected the shells in the magazine. They fell to the ground. Ben picked them up, one by one.

The last two were old cartridges. The brass was dull and tarnished, not shining new. I punched them back into the magazine and pushed one into the breech. My very next bullet dropped the elephant stone dead.

There was something wrong with the ammunition!

I had used eleven rounds to kill that one elephant!

All four of the problem elephants were dead so that part of the job had been completed nicely. We cut off their tails and headed for camp. Now we had the two buffaloes to find and to kill. I did not relish that task, not with the faulty ammunition.

That day, whilst we had been absent hunting the elephants, Old Man Arnott had separated what he considered to be his sick cows from the healthy ones. He confined the sick animals in a small quarantine stockade near the house – ever more certain that his sick cows had corridor fever.

I explained to the old man that I could not go after the buffaloes with the faulty ammunition we had been given. But he wanted those buffalo dead! So he loaned me his old .303 SMLE It was not a suitable weapon for the task but it was all I had to work with.

The next morning all eight of the sick cattle were dead. The old man called in a vet from Hwange town who confirmed the cattle had died of corridor fever. By then I had killed both the buffalo and was on my way back to Main Camp.

Mr. Arnott *had* phoned Bruce and he *had* complained about my *'laziness'* in hunting the elephants that morning. Bruce asked me what had happened and I told him. I also told him that later in the day I had shot all four of the culprit elephants. The proof of the pudding was in the eating! My total success vindicated me. Bruce shrugged his shoulders. That was the last I heard of the matter.

But the problem of the faulty ammunition remained.

Tim Braybrooke had still been at Main Camp at that time, so I am now not sure when all this happened. But whilst I was attending to the elephants and buffaloes on the Lukosi, Tim had been off elsewhere hunting stock-killing lions. He had shot a lion in the shoulder. The solid bullet had

disintegrated when it hit and smashed the bone. He, too, had realised something was wrong with the new batch of ammunition we had received.
The whole batch of ammo was sent back to the supplier. It was replaced immediately with a new consignment. Much later we were told the materials that the faulty bullets were made of was too hard and too brittle. They shattered when they hit something solid, like a bone or heavy skin.

Both Tim's and my hunting experiences that day with, respectively elephants and the lions, could have ended tragically had we been seriously attacked by the animals we were hunting. But we were not attacked and we survived. And we both came away from those experiences a lot wiser that we were before they happened.

* * *

Graeme Arnott is now a world renowned bird artist. As I write these words, he lives just eight kilometres down the road from where I now live at Bushman's River Mouth. Bushman's River is a small town just across the Bushman's River estuary from Kenton-on-Sea in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. Graeme owns a small holding just outside Kenton on the road to Grahamstown. Like me, he works with his nose to the grindstone. We, therefore, rarely see each other but we do meet every now and again. His father is now long dead. I surprised Graeme recently by giving him a photograph of himself standing next to the elephant that I killed with eleven faulty bullets on his family farm fifty years ago. It's a very small world that we live in!

Using eleven solid bullets to kill one young bull elephant must surely be something of a world record. I hope Mr. Guinness does not record it as such – in my name – in his now famous Guinness World Records Annual!

* * *

Not long after this incident I was back on the Lukosi on a horse patrol.

We camped on the banks of the river in our usual campsite under the giant Natal Mahogany tree. I did not go across the sand to see Old Man Arnott because I was still smarting from him having reported me for being a lazy elephant hunter.

Just after sunset that night we were plagued by a single hyena. All night long it persistently tried to get at the horses. It was joined by a friend sometime in the middle of the night. To keep the two of them at bay the trackers had to keep the fires stoked up all night long.

The next morning we packed up camp and set off on our journey to Sinamatella and Madavu Dam. The road to the Sinamatella hill – and on to Mandavu and Robin's Camp – left the railway fireguard at the Lukosi River railway bridge and it ran along the northern bank of the river right up to Sinamatella. It was a badly eroded track that was then negotiable only by Land Rover.

We crossed the river, joined the track, and our caravan proceeded up the dirt road towards Sinamatella. For most of the way, there was thick riverine forest on the river side of the road – the left hand side. There was open woodland on the right feeding onto a steep rocky hillside. We progressed slowly along the track making practically no noise.

Something caught my eye in the bushes to my left. I stopped and looked down into the forest at the object that had drawn my attention. It was a bicycle, about thirty yards off the road, leaning up against a big tree. It was an unusual bicycle. It seemed to be covered in a dark-blue cloth and it was all covered-over with green leafed branches.

I clicked my tongue loudly. In front of me Mbuyotsi stopped and looked back. He had not noticed Turk was no longer following him. The tracker turned and walked back to me. I lifted a finger to my lips indicating that I wanted him to be quiet. I then turned and gestured with my hand to tell everybody behind me to remain quiet. It had just occurred to me that nobody *walking* along the road would have seen the bicycle. I had only seen it because I was up in the saddle on Turk's back.

The question ran through my mind: *Who would want to ride or hide a bicycle on this desolate piece of track.* We were well beyond the boundary of the Arnott farm. The only people who had any right to be here were those connected to the national park. And why would *they* hide their bicycle like this?

"There is a bicycle leaning up against that big mcitamuzi tree," I told Mbuyotsi softly, indicating the tree in question. *"It's been hidden under some leafy branches and there seems to be a big cloth bag on top of it. Go and have a look. Be careful."*

Mbuyotsi wound his way down the river bank through the forest edge carrying the old bull-barrel Winchester over his shoulder. He reached the bicycle quickly. I watched him fossicking about. He made a silent gesture that I should join him.

I dismounted and handed the horse's reins to Ben behind me. Then I left

the road and walked down to join Mbuyotsi at the bicycle.

"There are three big bags," he told me in a whisper, *"all full of dried meat. This is a poacher's bicycle."* I looked at the tear he had made in one of the bags. I could see the dried meat inside. I nodded my agreement. This was a poacher's bicycle all right and from the amount of dried meat he was carrying it was not any old poacher. This guy was the real McCoy.

"Are there any tracks about?"

"*Let's have a look,"* Mbuyotsi answered, casting his eyes about.

"Here... Give me that," I said taking the rifle from him. I checked the safety, knowing that Mbuyotsi always carried the weapon fully loaded. Nevertheless, I opened the bolt, too, to make sure there was a round up the spout. All was well.

When I looked up, Mbuyotsi was standing as still as a statue. There was a look of urgency on his face. He had been waiting for me to look at him. When our eyes met he made a *'shushing'* gesture with his lips, and with one finger he pointed several times towards our right hand side and down towards the ground. I stopped dead, keeping my eyes on his. Next he lifted both his hands and pressed the palms together – like he was praying. Then he put his coupled hands onto the side of his head and laid his cheek down onto them. It was the international signal for sleep. *He could see somebody sleeping!*

I nodded. *"How many?"* My silent lips asked him. He lifted a single finger into the air. I nodded again. Then I told him, in sign language, that I was going to walk over to where he was standing. I wanted to see what he could see.

There was one very large native man lying on the ground amongst the short under-story bushes. He was sound asleep. He was wearing a dirty and torn blue shirt and raggedy black trousers. He had well-worn brown shoes on his feet and he wore no socks. To one side of his head there lay a crumpled black felt hat.

At his side was a one-inch-thick long shaft of round steel about five feet in length. The end part of it had been expertly beaten into a spear head. The blade was facing Mbuyotsi and me. The man's hand rested against its shaft. He was ready for anything.

That spear was a deadly weapon. And he was big man. I felt sure he knew how to wield it.

Mbuyotsi made a gesture that indicated he wanted to tackle the man – to grab him whilst he was asleep. I looked at Mbuyotsi and I looked at the big

native on the ground. There was no way Mbuyotsi was going to handle this big man alone. And, as sure as eggs are eggs, I was not going to help him. I indicated that Mbuyotsi should wait and I that should go back for help. I signalled that he should stand behind the tree trunk to hide his presence until I got back.

I was back in next to no time with Kitso. He was the biggest of all the Bushmen on the patrol. He was strong, strong of mind and strong of muscle. Kitso came along carrying two small knob-kierrie axes. They were light and effective weapons. He handed one to Mbuyotsi. Now both Bushmen were armed and so was I.

I nodded my approval. We were ready.

Mbuyotsi stood next to the man's feet on the left. Kitso stood next to his feet on the right. Both their knobkerrie axes were at the ready. I stood back, pointing my rifle at the man from a position behind and between the two Bushmen.

"HEY WENA... NDODA. VUKA WENA!" Mbuyotsi shouted at the man loudly. *HEY YOU... MAN, WAKE UP YOU*.

The man woke up with a start. He took in the situation at a glance and rolled on to his knees, facing us. Then he was on his feet, spear in hand. He stood there menacingly. His eyes moved from each one of our faces to the other. The trackers stood their ground, their little axes at the ready. Behind and between the two trackers I stood with my rifle pointing at the man's belly.

There was fear in the man's eyes, and shock. But his equilibrium returned very quickly. The point of his spear moved from Mbuyotsi's belly to Kitso's belly – then back to Mbuyotsi. He completely ignored their little axes. His spear was a much more formidable weapon and it had a reach that the axes did not have.

I could almost smell his mind. It was burning. It was working overtime. His eyes focussed on the rifle in my hands. He had no answer to my rifle. It was, all round, the superior weapon. He looked up into my eyes. I was ready to pull the trigger. Just one serious move to injure either one of my trackers and he was a dead man. He must have seen that determination in my eyes for he suddenly relaxed. He dropped his spear. His hands rose up into the air above his head in surrender.

"*On your knees,*" Mbuyotsi commanded. The man complied. "*Hands behind your back,*" the Bushman said. The man pulled his hands down and

put them behind his back. In two slick actions the tracker had the handcuffs around the man's wrists. *"Now... On your feet."* For a long moment the man ignored Mbuyotsi's instruction. Instead, he looked up at me menacingly. Then, slowly, he rose to his feet. So far he had said not a word.

Mbuyotsi took the man by the arm and moved him towards the bicycle. It was not ten feet from where he had been sleeping. *"Is this your bicycle?"* Mbuyotsi asked him. The Bushman knew it was the man's bicycle but it was a question Mbuyotsi *had* to ask. There is no place in an official investigation for assumptions. He wanted and needed an affirmative answer.

The tracker knew all the right questions to ask. He had done this sort of thing many times before and he had been well instructed. I left him to it. I remained on guard, my rifle at the ready. There was something about this man's whole demeanour that I didn't like. Inherently I knew he was bad news. He ignored the Bushman's question.

"I asked you," Mbuyotsi said, *"if this is your bicycle."* The man looked at Mbuyotsi with a sneer on his face. He spat at the Bushman's feet. For his trouble Mbuyotsi smacked him across the side of the head with the wooden-haft of his little axe. It wasn't a tap. It was a really good whack that smashed the top of the man's ear onto his skull. Blood began to run from the now mangled top of the man's left ear. The blow really rocked him.

"Haauuu..." the man exclaimed, looking angrily at the Bushman at his side. Mbuyotsi was not a small man. Indeed, the MaSili Bushmen were not altogether tiny people – like the western Kalahari Bushmen – but our prisoner towered over him. Our prisoner was a very big and intimidating man. I suspected he was an Ndebele. Whoever and whatever the man was, however, he now knew that Mbuyotsi was not a pushover. Mbuyotsi was someone to be reckoned with.

"We are going to have trouble with this one," Mbuyotsi said to me directly, ignoring the man's angry exclamation. I had already worked that out.

"Kitso," Mbuyotsi said to his companion. *"You push the bicycle up to the track. I'll look after our prisoner."* I let the tracker thus take command and I followed at the back, my rifle at the ready, the safety catch off. Just before I set off up the rise I went back and picked up the man's spear.

We discovered the bicycle's back wheel had had a blow out. There was no way that anybody could have fixed such a hugely burst tyre out here in the bush. I surmised that that was why the man had hidden himself and his

contraband away in the heavy riverine forest below the track.

There were two big hessian bags – old mealie sacks – tied to the rear carrier frame on either side of the bicycle's back wheel. There was a third bag – a big blue-coloured cloth bag – packed across them both on the top. It was an immense load for a bicycle's back wheel to carry. That wheel had also been carrying the weight of our extremely large prisoner. It was no wonder the tyre had burst. All three bags were packed with long ropes of dried, smoked, meat – properly benghisa-ed meat. I immediately knew that our prisoner was taking the meat to Hwange Colliery town, not too far from Lukosi, there to sell it to the native miners. It made me wonder just how big an operation we had stumbled upon.

Our prisoner remained uncommunicative. He refused to say a word. When asked a question he either ignored it or he sullenly shook his head. Dumb insolence was his tack.

Mbuyotsi and I discussed our options. We both instinctively knew we were onto something very big. There must be a huge poaching gang operating somewhere in the game reserve – supplying cheap dried meat to a very large and illegal market in Hwange town. The native community attached to the colliery was enormous.

This was clearly the most important discovery we would find on *this* horse patrol. It turned out, in fact, to be the biggest coup we had ever made, under any circumstances. But we did not know that at the time.

I decided to abandon our patrol programme and to concentrate on getting some answers to the questions I wanted to ask of our prisoner.

We returned to our camp of the night before, on the south bank of the Lukosi. We already had our two wells dug in the sand – one for us, one for the horses – and the water was good. The grazing was good for the horses, too. And Old Man Arnott, just across the river, had a telephone that we could use, if needs be, to contact Hwange Main Camp.

Once we were back in our old camp we hobbled our prisoner with buffalo riems tied securely round his ankles. This we deemed necessary to make sure he wouldn't suddenly get up and run away. He was that kind of person. After the hobbling, we changed the handcuffs. We allowed him to sit with his hands cuffed in front of his body instead of behind. That made him much more comfortable.

Mbuyotsi and Ben harassed him all afternoon long, haranguing him

constantly, bombarding him with questions, riling him in an attempt to get him to rise, trying anything and everything to extract the information that we knew was hidden away in his obstinate head. He said not a word. Occasionally he shook his head as if he couldn't believe that we had actually captured him.

Towards late afternoon Mbuyotsi put Kitso in charge of the prisoner. He told him to stand guard over the big native and to watch his every move. Mbuyotsi and Ben, together, then left the camp and wandered off into the forest upstream. They had obviously gone to look for something I knew not what. They were back inside ten minutes.

I lay on my camp stretcher that afternoon, reading a big game hunting book I had brought along. I watched all these goings-on with great interest, wondering just what it was that Mbuyotsi was conjuring up for our guest. It was an interrogation ploy of some kind. Of *that* I was quite sure.

"I want to move our prisoner out of the camp." Mbuyotsi said to me. *"He is being obstinate and we won't get anything out of him the way we are interrogating him now. I want to try something different."*

"Where do you want to take him?"

"Just up the river a little bit. Out of sight of the camp."

The alarm bells started ringing. *"You don't touch him, Mbuyotsi,"* I warned the tracker. *"I don't want any charges of assault being brought against us."*

"Promise... Promise... Mahohboh," Mbuyotsi almost whined. *"I promise I will not touch him."*

"O.K. then," I relented. *"Where do you want to take him?"*

"Just up through the trees a little bit," Mbuyotsi obliged me. *"I just want to get him out of sight of the camp. Ben and I have found a good place."*

"Make sure he can't escape."

"He won't run away," Mbuyotsi promised me.

"O.K, then. Take him off," I gave him the permission that he sought.

"Then you must come back and tell me what you are doing with him."

"Yebo Nkosana. I will come back and tell you."

Mbuyotsi, Ben and Kitso assisted our prisoner out of camp. He was still hobbled so he could not walk fast but he went along seemingly willing. I noticed, however, that Mbuyotsi and Kitso were both carrying knob-kerries in their hands. These were the shafts of the axes they had used that morning

during the arrest. They had effected the conversion by simply removing the axe blades. Seeing those menacing knobkerries caused me great misgivings but I let them go. I trusted Mbuyotsi and I trusted Ben. They had given me their word.

If you delegate authority you must do so with confidence!

All three of the trackers were back in camp within fifteen minutes. The prisoner was nowhere to be seen. The three Bushmen kept their distance. They avoided making eye contact with me. They began carrying out the evening's camp chores as though that was all that mattered.

I had been preparing to go down to our well in the river sand when the trackers came back. I was busy gathering together some pots in which I could bring water back to the camp kitchen. With a pot in each hand I stood and I watched the three delinquents for some time, waiting for Mbuyotsi to come and speak with me. He completely ignored me.

"Mbuyotsi," I called over to the tracker. He lifted his head and looked at me. I made a gesture with the forefinger of my right hand, hooking it back and forth, telling him to come over. *"Come here."* The Bushman smiled sheepishly and walked over. *"What's going on?" "Nothing,"* he replied.

"Nothing! Where's your prisoner?"

"He is thinking Nkosana."

"Thinking?"

"Yes Nkosana. He is thinking about what he is going to tell us in a little while."

"You haven't hurt him?"

"No."

"He can't run away?"

"No."

"Did he tell you anything?"

"No."

"Is he all right?"

"Yes, Nkosana. He is all right. We will take you to him in a little while. You will then see that he is all right."

I looked at Mbuyotsi. There was a flicker of a smile on his face – a naughty, mischievous smile. *"He is going to tell us what we want to know,"* he assured me.

I decided to trust him. He had never lied to me and he had never let me

down. I did not want to show him my misgivings now.

"You don't want to tell me what's going on?"

"Not yet, Nkosana. In a little while. Hopefully within the next hour or two."

The next hour or two? What the hell were the trackers up to?

I looked at Mbuyotsi sternly. Then I turned my back and walked away. I had told myself that I trusted him, and that is what I was going to do. But I had started to get impatient and more than a little worried.

I had my warm splash bath as usual that night, and I shared the tracker's stiff mealie meal porridge with them, adding my own relish – a small heated tin of braised steak. Then we all sat around the kitchen fire together telling stories, asking questions, and obtaining the answers that each of us sought. Nobody said a word about our intransigent prisoner.

At eight o'clock I was ready to go to bed. More than two hours had elapsed since I had last spoken to Mbuyotsi about our poacher. I called the tracker over.

"O.K". I said to my Bushman friend, *"I want to go to bed now so I need to see our prisoner. Where is he?"*

"He is cooking."

"Cooking?"

"Yes, Nkosana he is cooking. It won't be long now before he decides to tell us his story."

I looked around the camp and beyond the flickering flames of the kitchen fire. There was no moon. The bush all around was a solid wall of blackness. *It must be a hell of a thing to be tied up and all alone out in the bush on a night like this*, I said to myself. I was thinking about our prisoner out there *somewhere* all alone in the pitch black darkness of the night. Then I remembered the hyenas. Suddenly I knew what Mbuyotsi was up to.

"You bastard," I said to Mbuyotsi without malice. I shook my head. I had to smile. The prisoner was *cooking* all right. The trackers would have told him all about the hyenas coming into camp last night trying to get at the horses. The thought of a hyena getting hold of you in the middle of the night was enough to cook any man's brains – to the frazzled state of a burnt offering.

Right on cue a hyena began howling in the near distance. It was upstream from the camp.

I thrust the rifle into Mbuyotsi hands and I picked up my torch. *"Let's go*

see him."

As we left the ring of fire-lit men, Ben got up and ran over to join us.

The prisoner was standing beneath a spreading Natal Mahogany tree two hundred yards upstream of the camp. His hands were held high on either side of a low but stout branch, just above his head. They were cuffed together above the branch. He certainly could not get out of that predicament. I ran the torch over his legs. He was still hobbled with the buffalo hide riems. He had been standing there in that position for nearly four hours! He had not been hurt but the subtle pain of that perpetual and awkward stance must have been excruciating. I was not prepared to think about what thoughts had been coursing through his mind.

I stood right in front of him and took pity on the man.

The hyena began howling again in the nearby mopani woodland.

"He is still cooking Nkosana..." Mbuyotsi's voice held an imploring tone. *"And if he won't tell us what he knows he deserves to have mpisi make a meal of his legs."*

"We can't leave him like this," I told the tracker emphatically. *"This is a torture that I won't have anything to do with. And if I allow you to carry on with this charade I will be just as guilty as you."*

"Mahohboh," the Bushman pleaded. *"We can't stop now. He is nearly 'done'."*

"Take him down," I instructed the two trackers. I was appalled and nauseated by their lack of humanity.

"Nkosana," Ben said to me quietly. *"Can I talk to you privately?"* He took me by the arm. Angrily, I shrugged his hand off. *"Please come with me,"* he begged me. And, unperturbed, he walked away from the prisoner and from Mbuyotsi. This action was very unlike Ben but I complied with his wishes. I followed him until we were out of earshot.

"We are onto something very big here," Ben reminded me. *"It is important that we find out just what it is. And this man will tell us everything that we want to know in just a little while. Just leave him hanging there for just a little bit longer – please Mahohboh. Just a little bit longer. Mpisi is here now. That is all we have been waiting for."*

"I can't do that Ben," I said to him honestly. *"This is not the way we marungus (white men) do things."*

"Mbuyotsi and I will stay here with the rifle," Ben said. He was now pleading with me earnestly. *"We will see that mpisi doesn't get to him. It was*

never our intention that the hyena should do him any harm."

"No! We must undo his handcuffs and get him back to camp." I was adamant.

"Well," replied my lead tracker, *"do one thing for us. Go back and pretend that you are prepared to leave him just a little longer. All we need is about five minutes more."*

I thought about what Ben had asked of me. I knew it was what Mbuyotsi wanted, too.

The approaching hyena howled again. The howl was followed by a series of ghoulish snickers. The animal was now much closer. It had discovered our scent.

And that snicker told me there were probably now two of them together.

The most common and best known vocalisation of the spotted hyena is a very loud descending, then ascending, two-note whooping call, rising to a high crescendo at the end. It is normally repeated several times.

WHhoooo- wuuUH... WHhoooo- wuuUH... WHhoooo- wuuUH...

This calls carries far and wide. This is the call the Bushmen mimic to relocate each other over far distances, or when they are greatly separated in thick bush.

The spotted hyena has another call – not nearly as loud as the whooping one – which they use for short range communication with other hyenas. It is a nasty snickering chatter that is eerie and frightening in the extreme. The 'laughing hyena'. You will hear this call when several hyenas are squabbling over a carcass, or when they get excited by the smell of food nearby. For people who are not used to this call it turns their blood cold.

I hung my head and said. "*O.K. Just five more minutes. Then we uncuff the man from the tree and take him back to camp*."

As Ben and I walked back to Mbuyotsi and the prisoner, the hyenas let out a chorus of demonic snickers. There were definitely two of them now. Definitely two. And they were now closer still – very much closer. They were honing in on us.

I shone my torch in the hyenas' direction expecting to see their glowing eyes. I saw nothing. They were further away than I thought. I was absolutely sure they would not attack us. With the torch and with the rifle we were quite safe.

I wasn't so sure how safe our prisoner would be, however, if we left him

where he was. But *that* I was *not* prepared to do.

As we got to the two men, Ben picked up a long dark object from the ground to show me. It was a piece of the poacher's own benghisa-ed meat. *"The mpises will eat this meat first,"* Ben advised me sagely, *"before they attack the prisoner. There are two or three other pieces lying around. The smell of the meat will attract the hyenas."* He was laying it on very thick.

The hyenas were becoming very vocal. Away in the distance I heard another one howling. The gang was gathering.

"O.K.," I said when I got back to Mbuyotsi. *"You guys win. If he won't talk he only has himself to blame. Leave him here and let's get back to camp before all those hyenas arrive."*

"Jah-Haah!" exclaimed Mbuyotsi gleefully, reinforcing in the prisoner's mind the fact that we were *really* about to go back to camp and leave him behind.

I played along with the trackers. If that fact was ever voiced in court of law, I would be found equally guilty of our prisoner's torture. I was ashamed of myself – but as Ben had said, our prisoner would probably be *'cooked through and through'* inside the next five minutes.

"Hendeyi," I said turning to go. *Let's go.*

I flicked the torch beam onto the route we would have to take to get back to camp. The three of us turned and started to walk away.

"Wait," said the prisoner in English. It was the first word he had uttered all day. The tone of his voice suggested that he well knew how to speak the language. *"Take me back to camp with you and I will tell you everything you want to know."* The man could speak English!

The three of us turned and looked back at our prisoner. I ran the torch's beam over him from head to foot. He shut his eyes and turned his head to one side.

"If you don't tell us everything we want to know," I said earnestly, *"we can always bring you back and hang you out to dry."*

"I will tell you everything – and more," he said equally earnestly. *"Just take me down from this tree. I can't stand like this one moment longer. My arms are killing me!"* And from the way he glanced into the darkness, the hyenas were also 'talking' to him.

We walked back the few paces that separated us from our prisoner. *"Tough shit,"* Mbuyotsi told the man defiantly into his face. The man ignored him.

Instead, he looked at me. He addressed himself directly to me. *"If I tell you what you want to know,"* he said, *"I want something in return."*

"What?"

"Immunity from prosecution!" he replied. *"Give me that and I will tell you everything you want to know. And if you employ me, I will work undercover for you in the Hwange collieries. There is a lot going on there that I am sure you game rangers in Hwange will want to know."*

It turned out our prisoner was an ex-policeman. He had left the police force because he had committed acts of corruption and been found out. He had elected to resign rather than go to gaol. Down-and-out, he had joined a poaching syndicate and was making good money selling poached meat out of Hwange National Park to the thousands of miners and their families who lived and worked in Hwange colliery town.

He now did the same thing he had done when it was discovered that he was a corrupt policeman. We had caught him in the act of moving poached meat out of Hwange and, rather than go to gaol, he elected to change horses. He saw an opportunity to turn a bad deal into a good one.

He was given immunity and he broke for us a giant poaching ring that we never even knew existed.

The information he gave the special branch police officers that he worked with in the weeks and months ahead, completely smashed the poaching syndicate for which he had been working. I did not myself work with the prisoner I had captured that day but the field staff at Robins Camp, working on the information he had supplied to the police special branch, captured eight major poachers. They were living in several well-established pole-and-mud walled thatched huts constructed on a high hill just outside the game reserve boundary behind Sinamatella. The base camp was located in no-man's land, on a Hwange colliery mining reserve which nobody ever visited. The game reserve staff destroyed miles and miles of bush fences. And they collected hundreds and hundreds of wire and cable snares that were set in specially prepared gaps in the fences. The estimated combined length of the brush fences they demolished was fourteen miles.

I can't remember, now, the actual numbers of animals the poachers had just killed, and which were recovered, when they were caught in that massive anti-poaching sweep. I know it included several giraffe, two lions and fourteen waterbuck – but there was a whole lot more. All credit to a job well done by the Robins Camp staff and to all those who helped them achieve it.

And all credit to Mbuyotsi for the execution of his unconventional plan that caused this very important prisoner to break. Such was the nature of my MaSili Bushmen trackers fifty years ago. They were wonderful and innovative people and I loved them all dearly. * * *

My work as a game ranger varied greatly from day to day. When I got back from this horse patrol Bruce, Harry and I went out and captured a young zebra stallion on the Main Camp vlei. The department had had a request from the Rhodesian army for us to capture and to tame-down a young zebra stallion which they wanted trained as a parade-ground mascot for the Rhodesian African Rifles – The RAR regiment. Bruce tasked me with the job of training it.

I hadn't a clue how to even start to tame down a wild zebra stallion. Bruce insisted it would be just like training a horse. First of all, he told me, I had to get the animal used to humans. I could best accomplish that, he said, by being near to it at all times. My trackers and I, he said, should walk all around the animal all the time. When the trackers weren't tracking they had to be with that zebra every waking hour of the day.

Within a week I was walking the zebra around the station, outside its pen, holding on to it by the halter. At the same time, the Bushmen kept it under control on the end of three long game-catching ropes. The ropes fed out from a rope harness about its withers, with trackers attached on each end of the ropes, in three different directions.

At one point the zebra reared up and I hung onto the halter. It lifted me right off the ground. When it came down it managed, somehow, to get its front left foot over my right arm and, when it came back down to the ground, its leg banged down hard on my arm tearing all the ligaments in my elbow. I spent a night in Livingstone Hospital and I had my arm in a sling for the next two weeks.

The zebra was, much later, handled by an expert horse trainer. It then left Main Camp and went off to join the army. * * *

At one point in my early career at Main Camp, I was required to be the Department's official escort of Miss South Africa – Nikki Caras – who was on a promotional tour of the country. This was a very pleasant assignment – better than training a cranky young zebra! What more can I say? What more dare I say? It happened!

* * *

There were even better times – better by far than escorting a very beautiful Miss South Africa around Hwange Game Reserve and Victoria Falls. There was hunting!

One afternoon I was tasked with the disposal of a stock-killer on nearby Dahlia Ranch. A leopard had killed a calf not far beyond the cattle fence that separated the forest reserve section of the Dett vlei from the bottom part of it which ran through the commercial ranch. Ben and I loaded up the traps and we went off to see what we could do. When we arrived at the cattle grid on the road, we were met by a native farm assistant who had been told to wait there for us. He showed us where the dead calf was located.

It was a tiny calf, not much more than a week old. The kill had been made mid-afternoon, right under the nose of the cattle herder who was driving the breeding cows and their calves to a nearby secure cattle kraal for the night. The man had chased the leopard off and called for help. Ben and I arrived on the scene just a few short hours after the killing.

The kill site was in short gusu and msusu scrub. There were no big trees nearby. The sandy substrate was very loose. Where the leopard had trodden, its foot had left deep imprints but the sand had fallen back into the indentations. This left little more than just a mark in the sand. My first impression of the spoor told me I was dealing with a relatively small leopard. The small size of the calf helped me lean towards believing the killer was equally small.

By the time we got to the kill the sun was sinking fast. We had precious little time to set *any* gin traps. The calf was lying with its back up against a matrix of regenerating teak scrub saplings. That meant the leopard would *have* to use the open side of the coppice to approach the kill. With only one or two additions of twigs and sticks I was able to direct the incoming leopard onto a single trap. I set that one trap two feet back and right in front of the calf's belly.

The sun had gone down and it was almost dark by the time I had finished. There was no time to cut a drag log to attach the trek chain to. The nearest suitable tree trunk was half-a-mile away. So I added one extra ten-foot length of heavy chain to the basic one that was already attached to the trap. That brought the total chain length to twenty feet. I secreted all the links under the sand and in amongst the shrubbery. I said to myself: *It is only a small leopard so it won't go very far with a double trek chain in tow*.

Wrong assumption! Big mistake!

I returned to Main Camp for the night.

The next morning Ben and I were up at the crack of dawn. We approached the trap cautiously and found that we had been successful. The leopard had come back and it had been caught. But it was nowhere to be seen.

I then realised my mistake. I should never have left the trap without a drag-log. Now we had a leopard in a trap with just a long trek chain in tow. It had been my experience that leopards don't give away their positions when caught in a trap, like lions do. They sit tight and silent and when they burst out at you in a charge, it comes as a complete surprise. All I could hope for now was that we would hear the chain links *clink* before this leopard launched his attack. And I knew those chain links would clink when the leopard gathered himself in preparation for the attack.

I was well aware of what Ben and I were up against. I cursed my stupidity. Now, I *knew* we had a problem. And it was a problem of my own making!

We followed the drag marks of the chain easily. Despite its extra length the chain had run in an almost straight line over the sand, through the shrubbery, and down onto the road. On the road my feelings of unease rocketed. I looked down and, on the thin sandy surface on top of the hard gravel below, I saw the giant pugmarks of the leopard we had caught. This was a huge leopard. It was not the baby that I had supposed.

I called Ben to a stop. I reconsidered my options. I had brought along with me Ted Davison's old 9.3 Mauser – because it had a telescopic sight. This was the first telescopic sight I had seen and the first one I had ever used. I had taken to it because at three hundred yards, with the scope, I could consistently place a bullet into a wildebeest's brain out on the open plains. And recently I had been called upon to shoot quite a lot of wildebeest – for game scout patrol and pump attendant rations. Three hundred yards was the distance most territorial wildebeest bulls allowed you to approach them on the open veld. Three hundred yards seemed to be their standard *'escape distance'*.

When I took the weapon up that morning I had visions of being able to find the leopard quickly, to stand back, to lean up against a tree trunk, and to put a bullet nice and easy through its brain. I now had a premonition that things, today, were not going to be that simple.

Main Camp was not that far away. I could drive there by Land Rover and

be back inside the hour. What I needed today was a pump action shotgun loaded with triple-A shells. There was just such a weapon in the station armoury and there were boxes and boxes of AAA shells.

I looked at the weapon in my hands. I had shot lots of elephants with this same little rifle – without the telescopic sight – and I had killed most of them cleanly with a single bullet through their brains. The 9.3 had poor knock down power but the bullet had enough penetration to do the killing job on elephants very adequately. The rifle I had used on leopards in the Matopos was a similar weapon and of the same calibre, so I knew the 9.3 was very suitable for leopard hunting. My overall experience using telescopic sights, however, was then very, very limited. My experience with regards to their use on a dangerous and charging animal was *non est*.

I shrugged my shoulders and said to Ben: *"Landa"*. I decided I was going to use the 9.3 Mauser and see how it performed *with* the telescopic sight.

Big mistake number two!

It was only then that I missed Mbuyotsi on the hunt. Even though he had never used the spare weapon he always carried, he was always *there* to render help should I ever really need it. And I had an intuitive feeling that, today, I might just need that wily Bushman's help. Today I had no insurance cover at all. I was on my own – except for Ben! And I was in no doubt that the odds were stacked against us.

The single long drag mark was child's play to follow. It crossed the wide, damp vlei in one long line. It passed through the cattle fence into the forest reserve. Then it climbed the sandy incline into the teak forest that lay beyond.

I told Ben to *'go slow'* – very slow. We would be needing all our faculties today. We needed to track and to look ahead with extra purpose. Today, we needed to be absolutely silent. More than anything else, we needed to be alert and listening for the chain links *clinking*. When the leopard moved I wanted to be sure we would hear the very first *clink*.

We crawled up the sandy gusu slope on the far side of the vlei and onto the flatter elevations higher up. Our eyes, our ears, our mouths were all the time wide open. Once the tracks were inside the forest proper the drag marks changed direction, to the right. Now the leopard travelled parallel with the line of the vlei. It was moving towards the vlei's far top end.

I tested the wind. Today it was blowing every-which-way. We ignored it. We had no choice. No matter the direction of the wind we had no option but

to follow the drag marks. We plodded on. We almost reached the new access road to Main Camp which was at least five miles above the Dahlia Ranch boundary fence. Then it happened. The end came abruptly.

There was a clearing in the forest with only limited shrubbery on the ground. The leopard had moved into the open and mulled around quite a bit. There were tracks all over an area of about five yards square. It had probably, for a while, fought with the trap – a trap that was clearly well secured around its right front foot. There was no way it was going to get out of that trap.

It had then moved to the right, in the direction of the Dett vlei. On that side of the clearing there was a big old teak tree lying on the ground. Its ancient broken branches held the trunk about three feet off the sand. Not even thinking about pursuit, the leopard had lain down in the shade of the tree trunk to rest its weary bones. That is where we found him.
That is where he found us.

Ben and I emerged into the clearing, silently, from the forest undergrowth. We came out into the open one directly after the other. We both looked down at the spoor in the sand in front of us. We saw the disturbed soil and we cast our eyes around the clearing. At exactly the same time Ben and I both saw the leopard. At exactly the same time, too, the leopard saw us. All three of us were equally surprised at the sudden confrontation.

The leopard didn't hesitate. In a split second he came at us in a full blown charge. The big steel trap that was clamped around his wrist was no impediment. The twenty-foot length of heavy trek chain waved around behind its racing body like a tail of flying silk. The leopard's eyes were locked onto mine.

My thumb flicked off the safety-catch. My arms, with long familiarity, lifted the weapon to my shoulder. My eyes looked through the scope. To my horror everything I saw was magnified four times. At that point I got a fright.

All I could see through the glass was a kaleidoscope of magnified pale brown desert sand, some sticks, a number of enlarged yellow-green leaves, and the in-and-out movement of a racing spotted skin. Nothing I could do allowed me to hold that charging leopard inside the lens of the scope. The fact that everything was magnified made the task doubly difficult.

Simply put, the big cat was coming at me with such speed and ferocity it was impossible to keep its image inside the lens of the telescopic sight.

I panicked. I had not thought this possible. I was suddenly thrust back a year or two in time – to a time when I was truly a novice hunter. I

remembered it well. *This is not happening to me*, my mind was telling me. I was out sync with reality. All I wanted to do was to run... run... run....

The leopard came on. There was now nothing for it. I would have to *ad lib* the shot. I took the rifle from my shoulder and, with both eyes open, I focused on the charging animal. I held the rifle in my hands and thrust the muzzle in the big cat's direction.

The leopard prepared to launch itself. The final stage of its attack had arrived. Had it hit me at that speed it would have knocked me flat in an instant. But, at that very moment, the heavy trap caused it to stumble. This brought the cat to a full and grinding halt right at my feet. It looked up at me, wildly, immediately gathering its legs beneath its body. The final event was imminent. It was preparing to pounce.

It was a fortuitous moment. It was now or never. I had a fraction of a second to do what had to be done. In one smooth movement, in one instant of time, I leant forward and, holding the muzzle mere inches from the leopard's body, I pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the big cat between the shoulders. It exited from the middle of its chest. At the precise moment the leopard was launching itself, the bullet punched its body back onto the ground.

I jumped backwards and ran off in a circle to one side. Walking around and away from the leopard now, I never took my eyes off it. I reloaded as I moved.

The big cat squirmed and kicked itself around in the sand of the forest floor. Its head was up. Its eyes were looking around but they were vacant. They were not *looking* eyes. They were not *seeing* eyes. They were a dead leopard's eyes. I knew the big cat was not going to get up again so I did not put another bullet through its head. It was dead within a few seconds.

As I stood there, watching the leopard die, my whole body began to shake. It was not an experience I ever want to repeat. This was one of those many times when *'Lady Luck'* had been on my side. There had been no hunting skill in what I had just accomplished. It was all pure *'luck'*. *'Luck'* had just pulled me through the most dangerous leopard attack of my entire life.

This was the one and only time I ever used a telescopic sight for hunting dangerous game. I vowed there and then – never again!

That was the second biggest leopard I ever shot. Its skin was selected out of several others to be properly tanned for display in the office of the Rhodesian Prime Minister. I surrendered my leopard skin to the Premier with

very good grace. The next time I saw it, about ten years later, it was backed with heavy black felt and it was hanging on the office wall of Prime Minister Ian Smith.

I recognised it instantly, and I told him that I had shot his leopard. And I told him, too, the unusual story of the hunt that day. He told me blandly that he was happy to know its history. *Happy to know its history? Little did he know....*

* * *

Many things happened in 1963 that I feel still need to be told, but space is lacking to tell these tales. One of historical significance, however, is the return of the black rhino to Hwange. The last of Hwange's once very large black rhino population had been shot by a lady rancher, at Mukwa, in the 1930s. She said she was out shooting rations for her labour gang and she mistook it for an eland.

In 1963 Rupert Fothergill was still catching animals that were marooned on many of the temporary islands caused by the rising waters of Lake Kariba. He had been doing this work for five years. By the Christmas of 1963 the rising waters of the lake would have covered all these islands. December 1963 was the month when the lake filled to capacity for the very first time.

Most of the animals that Rupert captured on the islands were released directly onto the nearby mainland. There they had to sort out their own futures amongst the Batonka people who had also been displaced by the creation of the lake. Lake Kariba was the biggest man-made lake in the world at that time.

An extra effort was made to save the black rhinos on the islands. They were captured and transported in large wooden crates to Hwange National Park.

It was my task to select a site near Mandavu dam and to build holding pens to receive these animals. I chose the riverbed behind the dam wall. The rear stream bank was very steep. It formed a natural barrier. The other bank sloped gently up out of the river course. I constructed the fences with heavy mopani poles. The water the stream contained was sufficient to serve the captured rhinos' needs.

Nobody told me what kind of pens to build so I made them expansive. I constructed the walls much as ranchers build pole kraals for their cattle. I now know that most wild rhinos would have simply walked through those flimsy structures but they served their purpose.

Fortunately the rhinos we received had been held for some time in very stout pens on the islands. So they were all, by the time they got to Hwange, familiar with confinement. They were also very tired after their long journey, through Northern Rhodesia, from Kariba. Furthermore, the purpose of their brief confinement at Mandavu was just to give them time to rest, time to have a good feed on the dry lucerne that was provided, and time to drink, before being released into the game reserve.

I kept each animal in its separate pen for about sixty hours. Then I opened the gates, just after dark, and allowed them to walk free – one by one. The rhinos came in batches of three and four animals. I had only built four pens so I could not handle any more than that. There were only four crates anyway. Altogether, over a period of about two weeks, I released nine mature bulls and two cows. One of the cows was only half grown but, so I was told, it was fully weaned and old enough to be released.

I opened the pens one at a time. The rhinos wandered out into the night all on their own. Only when the released animal had disappeared into the night did I open the next pen. I sat on the top of our five ton Bedford lorry, without making a sound, and I watched each one of them go in silence. No sooner than they encountered the first thorn trees they started to feed, and they kept on feeding as they moved ever further away. I could locate them in the distance by the loud ‘crumping’ sounds they made as they chewed the sticks they had bitten off, reducing the wood to little chips before swallowing.

We had one casualty in the release process. The last rhino to leave the pens was the young female. Upon her release she wandered off in the direction the big cow had taken twenty minutes before. I had the impression it was the young animal’s intention to join up with her. Whether by accident, or by intent, that is what she did. She went and joined the adult cow.

Not far from the pens, in the deep darkness of the night, I heard a serious confrontation erupt. There was much snorting and puffing, and squealing, too. It lasted barely a few minutes. Then silence returned to the night.

The next morning Ben and I followed the smaller cow’s spoor. I had a feeling there had been an altercation between the two cows. I was right.
We found the small animal dead with several huge holes in her belly and ribs. The noises I had heard the night before were the sounds of the big cow killing the smaller one.

So Hwange’s first inoculation of black rhinos was reduced to nine mature

bulls and one mature cow.

Much later we received a much younger cow which we housed in a stout pole corral that I constructed next to single quarters at Main Camp. Her name was ‘Sal’. She had had a sister-captive on the Kariba islands which Rupert had called ‘Vinia’. These names were derived from the scientific name for the floating Kariba weed – *Salvinia auriculata*. Unfortunately, Vinia died before she could be brought to Hwange.

Sal was about three feet six inches tall at the shoulder when she arrived. It was originally planned to let her grow up with us in captivity before releasing her into the wild. After the killing of the young female rhino at Mandavu we did not want Sal to suffer the same fate.

Early one morning, shortly after Sal’s arrival, I went outside to inspect our new charge. I was horrified to find Harry Cantle’s youngest son, Nigel, in the middle of the fairly large enclosure. He was playing with the young rhino. And it seemed it wasn’t the first time this had happened because the two of them seemed to be the best of pals. When I first saw them, Nigel, all four years old of him, was standing in front of Sal caressing her one eye with his little hand. And the rhino was loving it. When the rhino snorted the little boy smacked her on the face and told his new found pet to *“be quiet Sal”*.

It took me some time to coax Nigel to the edge of the pen whereupon I leaned over and snatched him out; and I took him home to his mother. After that Harry and Betty watched young Nigel like a hawk because he was forever in Sal’s company. As I remember it, Harry and Betty eventually just had to accept that Nigel and the rhino had become inseparable friends. And they came to realise that, as a consequence of that friendship, no harm was ever going to come to their overadventurous little boy.

I don’t remember now what finally happened between young Nigel Cantle and Sal, but I do know that Sally became so tame it was deemed *not right* that we should release her into the wilds of Hwange. So, when she was big enough, Sal was taken to the Matopos National Park, together with a much younger bull called Rupert. They were released together into the game park section at White Waters, my old stamping ground.

These rhinos from Kariba were the first black rhinos I had ever seen. It did not know it then but these animals, Rhodesia’s black rhinos, were to become a major factor in my future life. But all that was still to come.

* * *

The narrative of this book is now drawing to a close but there are many interesting non-hunting stories that I would still like to tell. At the risk of diluting this book's essential ingredient – big game hunting – I feel, nevertheless, compelled to touch on some of these stories because they reflect on my life as a game ranger at Main Camp.

My anti-poaching work took many strange twists and turns, and it was not *all* about catching *native* poachers. There was one white poacher, in particular, that I would like to tell you about. For a while he ran rings all around me.

He was a Rhodesia Railways engine driver, a huge white man of Afrikaans extraction. His name was Johannes Rinke.

Shortly after my arrival at Main Camp, during the earliest of my courting days with Babs, she and I went to a dance at the Railway Club in Dett. That evening I went to the bar to buy drinks. Rinke was sitting at the bar. He had a beer in his great paw and he was conversing with his drinking pals. When I came up to the bar it was clear that he already knew who I was. Dett was a tiny village so this didn't surprise me. He introduced himself and shook my hand. Then, with a loud guffaw of laughter, and in front of everybody present, he told me that he was the biggest poacher in Dett and that he had never been caught. He then told me that it would take more than just a "pip-squeak" of a game ranger like me to catch him.

He thus threw down the gauntlet in front of all the people of Dett.

Over time I discovered that Johannes Rinke, when coming into Dett on his train at two-o'clock in the morning, would entrust the driving of the train to his fireman. He would slow the train down to a light cruising speed and he would climb along the walkway to the front of the engine, taking along with him his .375 Magnum rifle.

In the penumbral light of the train's powerful headlight beam, he would sit down on the walkway and look for shootable game animals that were grazing near to the tracks along the fireguard. Those animals that fed on the fireguard regularly were used to trains passing in the night. They were totally unafraid of the big steam locomotives.

All along the track there were numbered yellow metal plaques which were affixed to iron stakes driven into the ground. These plaques appear every quarter of a mile and they are numbered accordingly: 10,00; 9.3; 9.2; 9.1; 9,00 – and so on. These plates tell the train drivers just how far they are away from any given destination. Rinke also put them to good use for his

poaching activities.

Inside a ten mile range either side of the Dett railway station, Rinke would shoot the animals that he wanted from the front of the train. He would then make a note of the next mileage marker as it raced past. Rinke, therefore, knew exactly where, along the track, he had shot each and every animal.

When the train docked at Dett at two o'clock in the morning, and when the new shift of engine-driver, stoker/fireman and guard had changed over, Rinke took his rifle back home. Then he and his fireman drove, unarmed, back along the railway fireguard track to the place where Rinke had shot his animal. The two of them loaded it onto Rinke's pick-up truck and they drove with it back to Dett.

Rinke was a huge man with upper arms as thick as my thighs. There were people in the town who swore blind they had seen him lifting a forty-four gallon drum of petrol, on his own, and put it onto the back of his pickup. So he had no trouble loading up the animals that he had killed onto his vehicle.

The poached animal was taken to the young fireman's house where the two men gutted it and hung it up in the closed garage to cool. The animal was subsequently skinned and turned into biltong, for sale to a market in Bulawayo. By breakfast time both men were back in bed asleep. So, unless you knew *exactly* what Rinke and his fireman were doing in the middle of the night, both men were unlikely to get caught.

Rinke was not greedy, rarely shooting more than one animal at time. But during the winter months, he shot an animal one, two or three times a week.

I eventually caught my white poacher by employing the native Rhodesia Railway's tractor driver in Dett, as an informer. Once a week my undercover *'agent'* used to visit every house in the village there to empty the garbage cans onto his tractor's trailer. I had tasked him with reporting back to me whenever he found blood on newspaper or on old rags; or when he found skins, or animal feet, or horns or hair, in the rubbish bins that he cleaned out. It was his municipal job to take the rubbish he collected to the town's rubbish dump, so he was never suspected of being in cahoots with me.

I accumulated a great deal of evidence on Johannes Rinke before I finally broke open the case. The charges against him, when I had finished with him, were huge. I implicated him with the poaching of a large number of animals and of several different species: including kudu, sable and roan antelope, tsessebe, gemsbuck – a rare occurrence in Hwange – and several buffalo.

Rinke, and his fireman, were both charged with many different counts of poaching. They were found guilty on every one. Mr. Johannes Rinke obtained, therefore, the criminal record that he said I would never pin on him. I was unable to charge him for poaching in the national park, however, because the fireguard was officially Rhodesia Railways property. He was given the option of paying a huge fine or going to gaol. He elected to pay the fine. And he paid his fireman's fine, too.

For a long while Johannes Rinke was the laughing stock of all the railway people who lived in the village of Dett. He never again called me a *'pip-squeak'*. He never again boasted that he was the biggest poacher in Dett. Nor did he ever challenge another game ranger to catch him poaching. He had learnt his lesson.

* * *

Harry Cantle had an interesting experience at Ngamo when Bruce despatched him there one day to deal with a crop-raiding elephant. The animal was an old bull with two broken tusks and he seemed pretty well set in his ways. He must have had some hunting experiences with Tim and I in the Ngamo teak forests because he refused to spend the daylight hours outside the game reserve. Unfortunately for him the daily activity pattern that he established drew everybody's attention.

At 9 p.m., as regular as clockwork, the elephant broke through the game fence in the upper reaches of the Sehumi. From there he wandered eastward through the gusu to the Ndebele croplands beyond. He spent all night filling up his belly with lush green crops and, in the early hours of the morning, he returned to the game reserve by way of the railway fireguard track.

There was a double metal cattle gate – one welded on top of the other – where the fireguard track crossed through the line of the game fence. The gate was supposed to remain shut at all times. There was a chain attached to the gate that hooked onto an L-shaped metal spike in the gate post. This arrangement was a simple and effective latch that normally kept the gate closed.

It was an easy matter for people, like us game rangers, to negotiate the gate when we wanted to pass through. One of the trackers would run out from our vehicle, lift the chain off the hook, open the gate wide, and let us pass through. He would then close the gate behind us and reattach the chain to the metal hook.

When the gate was closed it presented no barrier to our intrepid

pachyderm. The elephant simply fiddled with the chain and lifted it off the hook. One little nudge sent the gate flying open and the elephant walked through. Had he had the sense to close the gate behind him – and to resecure the chain on the hook – he would not have attracted so much attention. However, that never happened. So, every morning, someone from Mazai's village had to go and close the gate.

Harry and his tracker followed the marauder's nocturnal spoor, out of the lands it had raided, on three consecutive mornings. On each occasion the elephant had gone directly to the gate, opened it, and walked backed into the game reserve. Like I had been warned not to do on many occasions, Harry had been forbidden to shoot the crop-raider inside the game reserve.

On the fourth night, Harry relocated his campsite to a position that was just down-wind from the gate. He placed his camp stretcher just inside the game reserve boundary fence. Johnny Mlupe woke Harry up at four o'clock the next morning and told him he could hear what he thought was the elephant approaching.

The tracker had already recovered the big torch from next to the senior ranger's bed. All Harry had to do, therefore, was to get up and fetch his rifle which was leaning up against the wires of the fence. Harry, like I always did, slept naked but he had a towel on the ground sheet next to his bed. This he wrapped around his waist for the sake of modesty.

The two men, not saying a word to each other, took up their predesignated positions and they waited for the elephant to arrive. The big bull looked huge as it loomed out of the darkness. Its silent movements over the soft sand on the road were ethereal.

The wind was blowing softly into the game reserve from across the fence line so the two hunters did not have the wind to worry about. They stood at their posts a matter of ten yards from the gate, inside the game reserve. And there they waited.

The big elephant bull towered high above the flimsy game fence as it moved towards the chain fastening on the gate. There was the sound of the chain rattling. Then the big bull gave the gate a stiff whack with its trunk. It bounced inwards, towards Harry and Johnny, as if it had been forced by a spring.

"Now!" Harry commanded his tracker, bringing his rifle up to his shoulder.

The torch beam blazoned through the dark night air, illuminating the

huge form of the elephant no more than ten yards away to their fore. As the light struck it, the big bull backed off a bit and turned sideways. Harry's bullet caught it just forward of its ear hole. The big animal collapsed onto the road and rolled over onto its side. Straight away its top back leg began kicking in the air.

"Shut the gate," Harry instructed his tracker peremptorily. He had already seen that the elephant had fallen just outside the line of the fence. He jacked another round into the chamber of his rifle and put the safety catch on.

Stripping off his towel, Harry returned to his bed. There was still another two hours to go before he *had* to get up.

That was the easiest crop-raiding elephant hunt that Harry Cantle was ever likely to experience in his entire life. * * *

Sometime during mid-1963 I received a permit from head office that allowed me to catch baby crocodiles, or to collect crocodile eggs for captive hatching. The Gwaai River was my hunting area. The crocodiles were to be used for experimentation purposes at Main Camp. In my application for the permit I had stated my reasons as wanting to ascertain if it was possible to rear baby crocodiles in captivity: (1) to see if commercial crocodile farming would be possible; and (2) to see if ten percent of captive-reared crocodiles could be safely returned to the wild to bolster wild crocodile populations. I also wanted to determine if I could feed baby crocodiles on insects simply by placing a lamp over their ponds at night.

This idea stemmed from three pieces of information: (1) The results of Dr. John Weir's research into the status of insects at Main Camp – and his conclusion that there was a greater insect biomass in Hwange National Park than the combined weights of all the game reserves' large mammals; (2) The results of Dr. Hugh Cott's research on crocodiles in Northern Rhodesia – which concluded that baby crocodiles subsisted largely on insects; and (3) Dr. Hugh Cott's assessment that crocodiles lay, on average, sixty-five eggs once a year (between 40 and 100) – and that only one percent of all crocodiles hatched ever reached maturity.

I spent several nights wandering up and down the big pools of the Gwaai River in search of baby crocodiles, using Main Camp's small wooden boat and its five-horse-power Seagull outboard motor. I looked for the crocs with a big spotlight that fed off my Land Rover's battery – secured in the prow of the boat. Crocodile's eyes shine brightly white in a torch beam at night. I saw lots of crocodiles, but they were all mostly big crocs. There were very few

small ones.

In the end, after exhaustive searching, I managed to catch one small crocodile that was just two feet in length. It was an easy catch. All I had to do was approach him in the boat, lean over its prow, and snatch him out of the water by hand.

I housed the little chap in a small pond that I had constructed at Main Camp. I then fed out to the pond a long extension lead from one of the electrical wall plugs in single quarters, and I hung a naked bulb about three feet above the water. The light shone every night from dusk until about ten o'clock at which time the generator was switched off.

One crocodile was not enough for my purposes. All I did in the beginning, therefore, was to make observations with regards how my little crocodile reacted to those insects that did visit the light, and which fell into the water of his pond. This was the sum total of my crocodile research efforts in 1963.

* * *

Tim and Harry, just before Tim left for Victoria Falls, were called out to shoot a stock-killing crocodile in the Gwaai River. It lived in a big river pool just upstream from the hotel. In one month, the crocodile had killed and eaten two of Bert Riding's cattle – both large half-grown animals.

Tim had hunted crocodiles commercially in Botswana just after leaving school so he knew exactly what to do. On this occasion Harry elected to go on the hunt with him because he wanted to see how Tim went about shooting crocodiles at night. That meant I had to stay back at Main Camp. There was only room in the boat for two.

They used the same little boat-and-motor that I had used to catch my baby crocodile, and the same spotlight, too. They found the crocodile easily enough and Harry, working the engine at the back, steered the boat right onto it. Tim, stood in the prow of the boat with his .22 Savage rifle at the ready. At a range of only three feet from the rifle's muzzle he shot the croc in the head.

The crocodile was lying in shallow water on the edge of a sandbar. So, once he had killed the crocodile, Tim jumped overboard. No sooner than his feet hit the sand, he grabbed the still quivering animal by a front leg. The boat ran over the crocodile's body. It took Harry a little while to re-arrange his position and to come to Tim's assistance. Tim hung onto the crocodile's one front leg to stop it's body sliding into deeper water.

It was a huge crocodile, one of the biggest Tim had ever seen. Together

the two men pulled and pushed its body onto the edge of the sandbar. Even though they were both big strong men they were unable to get it out of the water. They tried everything, from pulling it to rolling it over and over. It was just too big. So they pulled the boat onto the sandbar and they tied the prow's towrope around the crocodile's neck. This secured the crocodile to the boat.

Both men then retired to the Gwaai River Hotel where they *camped* for the night.

The next morning they returned to the crocodile with a gang of the hotel's native labourers. Together, but still with great difficulty, they managed to roll the crocodile's body onto the sandbar.

That crocodile must have been a warrior of note in its youth because about six feet of its tail was missing (probably bitten off by another crocodile when it was quite young). One complete front leg had been removed, too (probably also bitten off by another croc when it was small). And one side of its bottom jaw had been seriously smashed by a bullet many years before. The bones of the jaw, and the open wound of the flesh, had all healed very nicely.

Tim Braybrooke is about six feet four inches tall. He has a long lean body and long narrow limbs to boot. When he sat on *this* crocodile's back there was nothing he could do to get both his feet on the ground at the same time – so great was the crocodile's girth. It measured, from its nose to the end of its truncated tail, fifteen feet six inches long.

I could not believe the length and the girth of this crocodile's belly skin when Harry and Tim returned to Main Camp with their booty.

* * *

My three-and-a-bit years at Main Camp in the early 1960s was, for me, a time of great adventure. Those three years allowed me to explore massive new hunting opportunities, to achieve unbelievable big game hunting accomplishments, and to realise the wildest of my dreams to become a big game hunting game ranger.

Those years began under Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke's training and mentorship. He took me carefully through to the stage to where I was allowed to hunt elephants and buffaloes on my own. At that stage I was already an accomplished leopard hunter. During this period, I taught *myself* how to hunt lions – with the help of my Bushman trackers.

I cannot pass this point in my narrative without making mention of Bruce

Austen's contribution to my life. Nothing would have been possible and I would have accomplished nothing at all, if Malindela had not had the guts to give me my head. I could not have wished for greater leadership.

GOD CREATED MAN THE HUNTER described my early hunting years, when I was still very much a greenhorn. Those years laid the foundation for the rest of my life. In those early days I was petrified every time I hunted a dangerous big game animal. The more I hunted them, however, the less fearful and the more accomplished a hunter I became. I tried desperately to impart those early feelings, thoughts and anxieties to my readers in that first book. This was not easy to do because those times were fifty years and more ago. Nevertheless, I believed I had to explain how, why and what I felt, digging deep into my memory banks to haul out those old fears and old feelings from a time that was so long ago.

I taught myself how to hunt leopards. I had nobody to tell me what to do, or what to expect, and my imagination often ran riot playing havoc with my mental and nervous systems. But I lived, I learnt and I survived, sometimes only God knows how!

When I went to the Matopos, Game Ranger Jurie Grobler willingly imparted to me all his knowledge about leopard hunting – adding to my own personal experiences. He also showed me how to trap stock-killing leopards with gin traps. His advice and his tuition, and my hunting with him over a period of just eleven months, advanced my experience and my leopard hunting capabilities in one great bound. It also laid a solid foundation for me, once I got to Main Camp, to trap and to hunt lions.

At Main Camp, inside three months, Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke carefully taught me all the rudiments of elephant hunting, and of buffalo hunting. He gave me my wings. Once I had shaken off the chains that had bound me, with his training under my belt, I soared up to the heavens.

I quickly discovered, however, that I did not 'know it all'. What Tim had taught me was really just the basics. I then had to find out, by myself, how to really hunt the big game animals of Africa. It was my Bushman trackers who helped me the most to put the polish on my big game hunting experiences.

This brought me round full circle. I was once again on my own. I had to find out all about the particulars, the niceties and the intricacies, of hunting big and dangerous game animals all by myself. This time, however, I had a solid foundation on which to build the accumulation of experience that was to come. I had also lost my basic fear of Africa's dangerous big game animals.

During those times when I sometimes forgot to respect them, the elephants, the buffaloes, the lions and the leopards that I was hunting, very quickly brought me down to earth. Ultimately, when I had gone through all the learning stages of becoming a salted hunter, I was left with the sure knowledge that it is never a good idea to lose your respect for the animal that you are hunting.

I lived in a game reserve every day of my life. I also conducted horse patrols deep into the bush where, for weeks on end, I never saw another human soul other than my constant companions, my Bushmen friends. All the while, however, I was forever in contact with four of the Big-Five game animals of Africa. Every encounter I had with them – no matter what – taught me a little bit more about them; and I learned, all the time, how I needed to handle myself in their company. All these contacts, even if they were uncomplicated or just incidental experiences, helped my big game hunting career like you cannot imagine.

Only the rhino was absent from my hunting repertoire

In the process of all this, I was forever re-accepting the fact that I still had an awful lot to learn. And that knowledge, that state of affairs, that feeling, remains with me to this day. Nobody will ever know everything that needs to be known about big game hunting in Africa. Nevertheless, getting hold of a good Bushman tracker is a good way to start the learning process.

Nobody can teach somebody else ‘experience’. Experience comes only with repetitive practice and constant exposure to particular series of events. Experience is the result of the cumulative application of acquired skills, and it comes about only over a very long period of time. To become experienced requires that you have to have lots of opportunities to apply the skills that you have learned. It just so happened that the circumstances at Hwange, during the period 1960 to 1963, gave me all the opportunities that I could ever have wished for, to hone my hunting skills to almost perfection.

THIS book tells THIS story – the story of my big game hunting maturation.

I turned twenty-four years old in the August of 1963. By then I was already not only an experienced hunter of elephants – and of buffaloes, leopards and lions – I was by then developing into a *highly* experienced hunter of all these animals. This was not because I had *made this happen for me*. It was because I had been lucky to arrive at Main Camp at the start of a period when it became policy for the game rangers of Hwange to hunt down

and to destroy every elephant and every buffalo that crossed over the national park boundaries.

My arrival also *just* preceded a major change in policy which required that we stop supplying an expensive weekly beef-ration to the native staff on station, and that we replace it with buffalo. This meant that *somebody* had to shoot two buffalo bulls every week for this purpose. It so happened that – for three years – I became the *dog's body* single young game ranger who did most of this work. In those days, there were only two single game rangers at Main Camp, Tim Braybrooke and me!

Finally, all this happened at a time in my life when I was *ripe* for the big game hunting tasks that I was required to perform. It happened during the most physically-fit period of my life. I was then 21, 22, 23, and 24 years old. It happened, therefore, at a time when I was also starting to physically mature into adulthood. And, it just so happened that big game hunting was my burning passion.

So, all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place.

This second book in the series is a look backwards into what happened to me – all the whys and the wherefores – during my three years at Main Camp in the early 1960s. But there is another story to tell. It concerns how this history affected and paved the way for what lay ahead in my future life. The big game hunting experience that I gained whilst stationed at Main Camp was to stand me in good stead. It was also to have repercussions that would reverberate throughout the country, in many ways, for many years to come.

* * *

In October 1963 the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland came to an end. The Federal Department of National Parks, in its entirety, became the *Southern Rhodesian* Department of National Parks. This was inevitable because, during the days of the federation, neither Northern Rhodesia nor Nyasaland had ever ceded land to the federal government. This meant that every single federal national park was located inside Southern Rhodesia.

At the same time, there was a territorial (Southern Rhodesian) Game Department which operated also only in Southern Rhodesia. Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland had their own territorial game departments.

The Southern Rhodesian Game Department, besides attending to problem animal control work throughout the country – such as elephant and buffalo crop-raiding control; and lion and leopard stock-killing control – was

also responsible for the care-taking of many undeveloped game reserves throughout the Zambesi Valley – among them Chete, Chizarira, Matusadona, Kariba, Mana Pools, and others. It also managed every one of the country's many controlled hunting areas (safari hunting areas), too. The Game Department, therefore, commanded quite a large proportion of Southern Rhodesia's rural real estate.

Like all other Southern Rhodesian government departments in those days, the Game Department never had enough posts. Its field stations were always understaffed and, with a heavy workload, they were always over-committed. It must also be said that their field stations were unsophisticated and totally undeveloped. The Federal Department of National Parks, by comparison, executed a much slicker operation.

The game wardens and game rangers of the Federal Department of National Parks had, for many years, been automatically appointed Honorary Game Department officers in Southern Rhodesia, and they assisted the Game Department with its heavy game control workload. All the big game hunting that I conducted outside Hwange National Park in the 1960s, therefore, was legal *only* because I was a registered Honorary Officer of the Southern Rhodesian Game Department.

The dissolution of the federation, therefore, left Southern Rhodesia with two government departments with almost identical functions. Even during the days of the federation their roles had been different but parallel. After the break-up of the federation, therefore, it was decided to amalgamate both departments.

The Southern Rhodesian Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management then came into being. Over the next sixteen years, until Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, this new department was to generate an enormous amount of respect inside Africa and across the globe.

In 1963, the government of the day determined to *force* the amalgamation because it was well known that a huge mountain of animosity and petty jealousies had built-up over the years between some of the personnel in both departments. It was planned, therefore, to re-shuffle officers between old Game Department stations and old National Parks Department stations, in a big way. In this manner the government forcibly forged a unified new department in the quickest possible time. Nevertheless, this action dislocated many people's lives.

My days at Main Camp were numbered. I was earmarked for transfer to

Binga, a small and very new government station in the middle Zambesi valley. Binga is located on the upper-southern shoreline of Lake Kariba, a hundred miles as the crow flies from the Kariba dam wall. I knew nothing about Binga. Few other people knew much more. When I heard of my impending transfer I thought the bottom of my world had fallen out. I was not the only one to be disrupted.

Just one year before this catastrophic announcement, the Federal National Parks Department had segmented the country into two provinces – east and west. John Tebbit, formerly the Warden-in-charge of the Victoria Falls National Park, had been appointed the Provincial Warden-incharge of the Western Province. He was based in Bulawayo. John Tebbit was replaced at Victoria Falls by John Hatton from the Matopos.

Doug Newmarch (from Inyanga National Park) had been appointed to the post of Provincial Warden-in-charge of the Eastern Province. He was relocated to Salisbury.

The formation of the two provinces meant Bruce Austen (and Hwange) fell under John Tebbit's command. Bruce objected. He had had a lot to say about his position in the Western Province at the time. He felt that Hwange, on its own, deserved to be a province. At the time that idea was not considered. John Tebbit never, to my knowledge, ever visited Hwange whilst I was there. Bruce, therefore, seemed to have won the day but nobody spoke about it.

When the two departments amalgamated *five* new provinces were created. This development dissolved the previous two national park provinces. The new provinces were designated Mashonaland North and Mashonaland South; Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South; and Victoria (in the southeast of the country).

Four of these provinces were immediately commanded by former national parks officers – probably because national park officers were much better trained and experienced in administration. The one exception was the Game Department's Barry Ball. He became the new department's Provincial Warden Mashonaland North.

There were rumours of many other promotions and transfers. Some of these came about, others did not. Bruce was very early on advised that he was to be promoted to Provincial Warden and transferred to the new Victoria Province. Harry was told to prepare himself for promotion to Game Warden and transfer to Marangora, a post located on the high escarpment overlooking

the lower Zambesi valley. That was in the Mashonaland North Province. Jordy Jordaan was appointed Warden-incharge of Inyanga National park – in Mashonaland South. It seemed that Hwange had become a prime target for dismemberment.

I myself was to be promoted. After having served as a cadet game ranger for two years, and as full game ranger for only another two, I was promoted to the new post of Senior Game Ranger-in-charge of the Binga District. I was elated but also felt deflated – because I was going to be leaving my beloved Hwange and I had no idea what my work would be like at Binga.

All I was told was that Binga was five thousand square miles in extent – the same size as the whole of Hwange National Park; that the district contained two game reserves – Chete and Chizarira – each five hundred square miles; and that there was an awful lot of work to do. Just what that work entailed I was told very little. What I did know was that I would be the only game ranger in that whole vast piece of pristine Africa.

I asked Bruce what he knew about Binga. He knew very little. There would be elephant crop-raiders to shoot, he said, and probably stockkilling lions. And he had heard I would be doing patrols on Lake Kariba in a large cabin-cruiser-type launch. Finally, he advised me to just go there and to do the best that I could. *"You will be all right,"* he told me comfortingly. *"I have no doubt at all that you will be all right. You are going to Binga on my recommendation."* That was the last serious conversation I remember ever having with the great Malindela.

* * *

I had come to Main Camp in October 1960 almost destitute, but the move had been good for me in many ways. From the moment I arrived I had been happy. I had clawed my way back into a state of reasonable financial stability over the years, saving my meagre salary each month, being frugal with my personal purchases, living on buffalo meat, and expanding my monetary reserves with the help of the seventeen-shillings-andsixpence-per-day travelling-and-subsistence allowance that I received every day that I was on patrol.

I had used my personal Land Rover on all my latter-day patrols and was able to claim *'mileage'* from the government for every official trip that I made. The costs of running the vehicle, of course, was to my account. Nevertheless the mileage allowance brought in even more cash to help please my bank manager. So, by the time the advice of my impending transfer came

through, I had a small nest-egg in the bank.

Throughout all this period Barbara (Babs) Wilkinson, my school teacher girlfriend in Dett, and I, had been courting. We had become engaged. We had even set a date for the wedding which was scheduled for 14th January, 1964. We had planned, and arranged, to live in one of the tiny new staff houses that had been built at Main Camp during its recent phase of expansion and development. And we had worked out our meagre budget accordingly. In anticipation of all this happening, Babs had resigned from her teaching post at the beginning of the last school term of the year. She was due, therefore, to leave employment at the end of 1963.

The final act of the federation's dissolution changed a great deal of our plans. My promotion and transfer to Binga was just one such unexpected consequence of the break-up.

Teachers who were employed by the Federal Ministry of Education had been originally informed that they were to be re-assigned to their respective territorial governments. This was planned to come about at the beginning of 1964. Many teachers complained, saying they had no wish to be employed by the one or the other of the separate territorial governments. They said that if the federal government was to be dissolved, then its employees should have a better choice about their future options.

It was announced very late in the day, therefore, that all federal teachers who did not wish to work for one of the three territorial governments, were to be officially retrenched and that they were each to receive a *golden handshake*.

Babs immediately lamented the fact that she had not waited to hear about the final terminal arrangements before resigning. But a friend, who was working on the retrenchment packages in the Ministry of Education, told her that it was not too late to withdraw her resignation. She said that Babs could then, two weeks or so later, apply for retrenchment. There was so much turmoil in the ministry at that time, her friend had said, nobody would notice what was happening, and nobody really cared.

Babs withdrew her resignation. It was immediately accepted. Two weeks after she received confirmation in writing that her withdrawal-ofresignation had been accepted, she applied for retrenchment. That, too was granted. This provided Babs with the handsome 'golden handshake' that she believed had eluded her. No about-to-be-married couple could have wished for a better wedding present!

Christmas and New Year 1963, was a period of great rejoicing, therefore, in both the Wilkinson and the Thomson households. Babs and I got married on schedule and we prepared ourselves for our inevitable transfer.

We combined our financial assets and spent most of it on what we believed would be our immediate domestic needs. This included a new paraffin fridge, a new paraffin deepfreeze and some basic furniture for our new home in Binga. There was no electricity in Binga so we had, perforce, to purchase paraffin Tilley lamps also.

I sold my lovely reconditioned Series One Land Rover and we bought a brand new Series Two short-wheel-base Land Rover – out of the box! It, too, had a canvas top. And as a special wedding present, Babs bought me a 35 mm reflex camera. It was the first proper camera that I had ever owned.

We had a three-day honeymoon in Bulawayo, spending most of the time shopping for our carefully considered purchases. On our return Babs and I packed up everything, we said goodbye to family, friends and colleagues, and we set off for Binga, one hundred and twenty miles away in the Zambesi valley. And, for both of us, a whole new life-venture began.

I had wanted to take both Ben and Mbuyotsi with me but Malindela would have none of it. *Only one*, he had said, take *your pick*. He said that if all those of us who were being transferred took our pet trackers with us, there would be nobody left to run Hwange. That statement said a great deal about just how important Bruce Austen considered the trackers to be. And I understood! Bruce himself, now that he was moving into an even higher administrative position, decided to leave his own tracker, Sumbe, at Main Camp.

Sumbe had been born at Main Camp. ‘Bamaboozie’ – Ted Davison’s wife, Connie – had helped deliver him. Main Camp was Sumbe’s home. He was comfortable there. He was something of an institution in the game reserve’s headquarters.

I chose to take Ben with me to Binga. In my opinion he was by far the best Bushman tracker at Main Camp. That, and last-minute information I had received that I would still be shooting crop-raiding elephants, was the deciding factor. My big game hunting career needed Ben’s superb tracking abilities much more than my persona needed Mbuyotsi’s friendship. I was sorry to leave Mbuyotsi behind.

Ben, together with his ugly, long and skinny but faithful mSili wife, preceded us. He was there waiting when we arrived.

Little did I know it then but, by the end of my first year at Binga (1964) – among many other things that happened – I was to shoot over six hundred elephants mostly in protection of the Batonka people's crops. Hwange National Park, and the then very wild countryside that surrounded it, had become my personal big game hunting paradise over the last three years. It had become part of my heart, part of my soul and part of my psyche. It had become part of my whole persona. I was loath to leave Main Camp. I had believed nothing could be better. I had believed I would never again find the kind of big game hunting satisfaction that I had enjoyed during my three-and-a-bit years at Main Camp. I was wrong. The next five years at Binga was a hundred times better. In fact, all that my big game hunting experiences at Hwange had done, was to prepare me for everything that was still to come.

I didn't know it then but my life's big game hunting adventure had only just begun!

Appendix One

An evaluation of some of the sequences of events and the circumstances that have shaped my life as a Game Ranger and as a Big Game Hunter in Africa

THIS is the second of a planned series of six books that catalogue my life as a game ranger/game warden and as a big game hunter in Africa. As a big game hunter, I have been fortunate to have had the hunting opportunities that came my way at times in my life when I had garnered enough experience to take full advantage of every one.

Altogether, over a period of more than a quarter-of-a-century, I hunted Africa's dangerous *'Big Five'* game animals in numbers and under circumstances that boggle most people's minds. When nature-loving members of the public hear the figures they are horrified and, not understanding the facts and the circumstances, they often look upon me with disdain. My animal rights enemies gleefully use the figures to discredit me. And when I emigrated to South Africa from Zimbabwe in 1983, many avid hunters – people who are the closest to being my soul mates – were openly sceptical.

I was forty-four years old when I took up permanent residence in South Africa. I did not come to South Africa voluntarily. I came because Rhodesia had become Zimbabwe in 1980 and because by 1983 Robert Mugabe was ruthlessly *Africanising* the civil service. I was then the Provincial Game Warden-in-charge of Hwange National Park, the biggest game reserve in the country and one of the most prestigious national parks in Africa. The government forcibly removed me from my position after twenty-four years of dedicated service because I did not have a black skin. I escaped from Mugabe's vicious political machinery by the skin of my teeth, and my family took flight with me.

The wildlife and social cultures in South Africa were, and still are, hugely different to those I had grown up with in Rhodesia. Many things that I was expected to do in South Africa (because the law prescribed it) went very badly against the grain. But I got used to it over time and I have now assimilated into the country that gave me succour when I had few other places to go. I am grateful that South Africa gave me this haven and I am

now happy to call myself South African.

Since 1983 I have written several books and numerous magazine articles, and many people have come to know me through these literary works, but it still rankles that some still believe me to be just *'a fabricator of fine tales.'* They still do not believe the numbers of animals I have hunted. They do not believe that one man could possibly have done the things I say I have done. I have battled to impress upon my listeners and my readers, therefore, the fact that my stories are real and authentic.

I was recently introduced to a book called *'OUTLIERS', 'The Story of Success'*, written by Malcolm Gladwell. In this book I have discovered a way to explain my success as a big game hunter. Hopefully, it will enable my critics to understand and to accept just how my remarkable big game hunting experiences all came about.

Out-li-er = A statistic that is markedly different in value from others in the same sample.

Gladwell says that no person is born a genius. No person is born an expert. People become geniuses and experts, and/or they become successful in many different enterprises, most commonly because of lucky breaks.

Not everybody can become a great computer genius, musician, hockey player, or whatever. 'Want' is not enough. They must first have exceptional capabilities in their fields of interest. They must have a passion for it beyond the norm and that passion must drive them inexorably forwards. They must have ambition. Nobody will achieve their pinnacles of self-actualisation without these primary nuts-and-bolts.

Above all else, they need to be exposed to special opportunities.

The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves, Gladwell says, *but, in fact, they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages, extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn, to work hard and to make sense of the world in ways that others cannot.*

The culture we belong to, and the legacies passed down by our forebears, shape the patterns of our achievements in ways we cannot begin

to imagine. In other words, it is not enough to ask what successful people are like. It is only by asking where they are *from* that can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who does not.

Many researchers have settled on what they believe to be the magic number of hours-of-experience necessary for the achievement of true expertise: **10 000 hours**. It seems it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know, to achieve true mastery in any subject or endeavour.

This is an enormous amount of time. Most people will find it impossible to reach that number all by themselves by the time they are young adults. To do so you have to have parents who encourage and support you. You can't be poor because if you have to hold down a part-time job on the side to help make ends meet, there won't be time left in the day to practice enough. Most people can reach that number only if they get into some kind of special programme; ***or if they get some kind of extraordinary opportunity that gives them a chance to put in those hours***.

My history falls very neatly into Gladwell's *'outlier'* pattern. Unlike many of Gladwell's examples, however, I did not enjoy just *one* fabulous big game hunting opportunity, but many. They happened all in a row, mostly within the 1960s decade – and their effects extended over five decades. I am still enjoying the fruits because I now write about all the extraordinary things that have happened to me.

The opportunities also came at exactly the right times in my life. They came when I had garnered sufficient experience and ability to fully exploit each of the chances that came my way. I had a huge passion for the work I was doing and I worked very hard. I rose more quickly up the ladder of success, therefore, than any of my colleagues. And this brought me to the very highest of possible pinnacles in my big game hunting career.

I joined the Federal Department of National Parks, as a game ranger, in 1959. I was then just twenty years old. I had been a top athlete at school and I was very fit. I also had a huge passion for big game hunting. When I joined National Parks, I already had seven leopards under my belt and one elephant.

My first posting was to the Matopos National Park where I was the only single game ranger in the park. The Game Warden-in-charge was a married man with teenage children. The other game ranger, in his midfifties, was married with a young son.

In the first book of this series, GOD CREATED MAN THE HUNTER, I explained that because I was the only young and single officer in the

Matopos, it was me who went up to Hwange National Park to help capture, and to transport down to the Matopos, a whole host of young game animals which were used to stock the newly established game park section. Also – because I was young, single and had the experience – I became deeply involved in hunting the leopards that were killing these introduced young animals. For the same reasons, it was me who hunted all the stock-killing leopards in the Matopos region throughout 1960.

In October 1960 I was transferred to Main Camp, Hwange National Park. Two weeks after my arrival the annual game count was conducted, in which I participated. A total of 3500 elephants were counted.

The elephants were, at that time, eliminating the mukwa trees *(Pterocarpus angolensis)* and the big mlala palms *(Hyphaene crinita)* in the park. And most of the woodland habitats were being severely damaged.

Grazing was under pressure. Buffaloes were leaving the national park and exploring new habitats for the expansion of their home ranges. Buffalo carry two diseases that are fatal to domestic cattle – corridor fever and foot-and-mouth disease. The Veterinary Department, therefore, did not want buffalo roaming amongst the country's domesticated cattle.

It became policy, therefore, to eliminate any-and-all elephants and buffaloes that ventured outside the national park boundaries. From a national parks point of view, we reasoned that if we could kill sufficient numbers of these animals outside the park, there would be no need to introduce culling programmes *inside* the national park.

Significant numbers of both elephants and buffaloes were, at that time, living inside the teak forests of the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands all along, and just outside, the park's (then) unfenced eastern boundary. That region, therefore, became our focus of attention.

At that time, Main Camp was critically understaffed. There were only two young and single game rangers living at Main Camp, Tim Braybrooke and myself. We were the only members of staff, therefore, who were *fully* available to implement the new elephant and buffalo-hunting programme.

I was quickly trained to hunt elephants by Tim Braybrooke. Within three months I was deemed experienced enough to hunt both elephant and buffalo on my own. Over the next three years I did most of the elephant and buffalo hunting that was conducted in the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands. When Tim got married he was transferred to Victoria Falls National Park. The burden of elephant and buffalo hunting then fell even more heavily onto my

shoulders.

The same situation pertained with respect to the hunting of cropraiding elephants and buffaloes, and of stock-killing lions, leopards and hyenas, in the tribal trust lands and on the commercial cattle ranches throughout the Hwange and Tjolotjo districts. Furthermore, the hunting of two buffalo bulls for staff rations every week became my special task.

This, then, was the scenario that influenced me and my hunting inand-around the Matopos National Park (1959/60), and in-and-around Hwange National Park, during the years 1960/61/62/63. The last three years is the period covered by this book. The important factor to understand is that I arrived in both these national parks just before policy decisions were made that opened up huge big game hunting opportunities for me. They were, therefore, *'lucky'* breaks.

I had the prerequisites. I had a huge passion for big game hunting; enough ability when these opportunities arose to do the job that was necessary; and the ambition, the drive and the determination to make the most of those opportunities.

I also had senior members of staff when I needed them the most, who had sufficient faith in me, and who liked me enough, to guide me through the various stages of training (where training was necessary). They also gave me opportunities to hone my big game hunting skills, by way of self-teaching practice, that came about as a consequence of my constant exposure to top-notch big game hunting experiences.

The various books that are to follow in this series, will explain, within the contexts of each succeeding book, all the other extraordinary opportunities I was given to further my ambitions and my capabilities as a big game hunting game ranger. In all these respects I was incredibly lucky! These opportunities were all as unbelievable as they were fortuitous. The important thing is *'they happened'*!

So it was, therefore, that I became an *'outlier'*. I became someone with a big game hunting record that comes close to, or equals – in some cases maybe surpasses – the big game hunting scores of the most famous African big game hunters of history. At the same time it must also be said that the hunting circumstances of both eras were entirely different. Nevertheless, the comparisons are valid. My big game hunting record is certainly *'markedly different in value'* when compared to the sport hunters, trophy hunters and professional hunters of the modern day and age.

Comment on one judgement remains. Do I have Gladwell's magical 10 000 hours-of-necessary-experience to be classified as someone who has achieved *'true expertise'* in big game hunting?

When I set about trying to count the hours I have spent *actually hunting* the big game animals on my *'score card'*, I found the task daunting, complicated and confusing. For example, what part of a hunt can be construed as *'hunting'* and what not? A normal or classical hunt, I decided, started with me-and-my-trackers taking up the spoor of my quarry. It proceeded throughout the period of the tracking, and it ended with *'the kill'* – or, in the case of the black rhino, with *'the successful darting'*. The walk back to the Land Rover after an elephant or buffalo had been killed, I decided, should not be added to the *'hunting time'*, because that was not really 'hunting'.

In the case of the black rhino, I decided that the recovery of the animal from the field, its transportation in a sedated state back to the holding pens, and its recovery period from the drug inside the holding pens after having received the antidote, should be added to the *'hunting time'*. I made this decision because, I reasoned, getting the animal safely back to the pens was an integral part of *'the hunt'*.

So these factors became the criteria I used to calculate my ***'actual hunting times'***.

Other matters added to the confusion. Tim Braybrooke and I – during the period he was training me – worked out a system of scoring that included *'own kills'* and *'shared kills'*. We did this purely to assess my experience, as it grew, during my three months of basic big game hunting training. My *'own kill'* score included only those animals that had been killed by *my* bullets. A *'shared kill'* score included animals that were killed after receiving the bullets of more than one hunter. Thus, if I shot an elephant in the head and missed the brain, and Tim killed it with a second shot immediately thereafter, that elephant became a *'shared kill'*.

Over a period of some twenty-two years (1962-1983) I trained many young game rangers to shoot, and to cleanly kill, both elephants and buffaloes. During this process, I notched up many hundreds of *'shared kills'* in both species. And during many of the heavy elephant and buffalo hunting forays I was involved with in the tsetse fly operations (1964-1968) I shared many kills with experienced hunters, too. I haven't a clue, now, just how many *'shared kill'* animals were involved. So *no shared kills – none at all –*

were included in my calculations. They remained, however, a factor in my *'actual hunting'* experiences.

What I can tell you – from my accumulated and carried-over annual records covering some twenty-five years – my *'own kill'* figures include something in excess of 5000 elephants; 800 buffaloes; 50 or 60 lions; and 30 or 40 leopards.

I was also the principal hunter in the capture, translocation and release (into safe habitats) of 140 black rhinos, using dart guns and tranquilliser darts. Their pursuit and capture was conducted under conventional hunting conditions. That means the animals were tracked down with Bushman trackers, and they were darted using the conventional walk-and-stalk method of hunting. These hunts, to be successful, required the application of *the* most exquisite hunting skills imaginable. The hunting skills that I – and those few of my colleagues whom I trained to do this job – applied, when catching black rhinos, were infinitely more proficient than any I ever used to hunt any other wild animal. These black-rhino-capture-hunts will go down in history as the most exciting big game hunting adventures ever practiced! I have, therefore, *included* these rhino hunts in my *'hunting-time'* calculations.

I have also captured, with a dart gun, 20 white rhinos and 30 hippos. For no specific reason, I *exclude* these animals from my *'hunting-time'* calculations.

In the early 1970s I led the culling team, and was the chief hunter, in the removal of 2500 elephants, and 300 hippos, in the Gonarezhou National Park. Culling is not *'hunting'* – although it requires the application of considerable humane killing skills. These animals, too, are *excluded* from my *'hunting-time'* calculations.

I *should* include my lion, leopard and hyena hunts in my *'huntingtime'* calculations – but the circumstances of these hunts were so widely variable, and so convoluted with all sorts of problematical circumstances, that I have added only a conservative lump-sum guesstimate to the final total.

Finally, I must also explain the confusing fact that – even with my *'own-kill'* elephant score – there were difficult-to-determine factors inside the picture. The number 5000, in this case, must be split up into bullkills and cow herd-kills. I have hazarded a guess that half the number were bulls (2500), and half those bulls (1250) were singletons. The rest of these bulls (1250) were shot, on average, in numbers of between two and three animals at a time. And I have arbitrarily determined that the average cow herd

numbered 18 animals. None of these assumptions are necessarily correct but neither are they improbable.

In a nutshell, therefore, using all these kinds of assessments – considering elephant and buffalo *'own-kill'* scores *only*; accepting the black rhino captures as valid hunts (whilst acknowledging the difficulty I had making assessments with respect to the black rhino); and tagging on a small and very conservative lump-sum time-score for the big cats – my total big game *'actual hunting'* time-score comes to a cautious minimum of 25 000 hours.

25 000 hours equates to 2080 12-hour-days of* 'actual hunting time'*; or 5,7 years of* actual hunting time*, every day of the year, from dawn to dusk.

Quoting this figure is not a boast. I mention it to explain how my many superlative big game hunting stories are possible. They are not the fabrications of an over-active imagination. Many of my hunts were totally unremarkable. Most, in fact, were so routine they were downright mundane – and I have forgotten them. At the same time the law of averages dictates that I must have also been involved in a great number of very extraordinary hunting experiences. These are experiences that, in the planned six volumes of my Big Game Hunting Memoirs, I now have the privilege of sharing with my readers.

Ron Thomson[*] October 2010

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[*] I wish to acknowledge my use of the philosophies expounded in Malcolm Gladwell's book "OUTLIERS" (The Story of Success) in the compilation of this special addendum.

Appendix Two

The rationale supporting the killing of entire elephant breeding herds (including juveniles and baby calves) when population reduction exercises are undertaken

NOBODY enjoys the idea of killing baby elephants. Nature lovers everywhere abhor the practice. Game Rangers get no pleasure out of doing it. Most hunters will draw the line and refuse to do it. So why did we, the game rangers of Hwange National Park, wipe out whole breeding herds of elephants in the teak forests of Tjolotjo in the early 1960s? Why do elephant managers all over Africa STILL recommend the killing of entire cow herds – including the babies? The reasons are multifarious.

Most mammal species produce an equal number of male and female offspring. This happens with elephants. Adult elephant males, however, are shot more frequently than are adult cows for a number of reasons. Elephant bulls raid agricultural crops and they damage water installations – and the cows do not. Hunters shoot bull elephants more frequently than they do cows, because they carry bigger and better tusks. In most elephant populations in Africa, therefore, there is imbalance in the sex ratio. There is a preponderance of females.

Elephant population growth is entirely dependent on the number of breeding cows in the population. Adult cows produce a calf regularly every three to four years. So, irrespective of the number of bulls present, if you have 10 breeding cows in an elephant population you will only get 10 calves from that population every three to four years. If you have 1000 breeding cows in the population you will get 1000 calves every three to four years. The breeding cow component of an elephant population is ***the*** factor that affects the population's *'rate of growth'*.

Where bulls are shot in preference to cows all the time, therefore – as happened in the tribal and farming areas surrounding Hwange National Park prior to 1960 – there is a constant and progressive increase in the proportion of breeding cows in the population as a whole. This constantly increases the *'rate'* of overall population growth.

In 1960, a policy was adopted in the Federal Department of National Parks, to reduce the elephant population of Hwange National Park by as much as 1000. It was planned to do this by shooting each and every elephant that crossed the park boundary – anywhere and everywhere. Most of this shooting was done in the Tribal Trust Lands (TTL) of the Tjolotjo district, east of the park boundary. It was considered that shooting large numbers of elephants *outside* the national park, and letting the local native people have the meat, was preferable to conducting culling operations *inside* the park.

All this being the case, there was no point in shooting *just* bulls when it was the cows that were doing all the breeding. Ideally, we should have been shooting one cow elephant for every bull that was shot, thus keeping the natural 1:1 sex ratio in those elephants that were left. Such finite adjustments, however, were not a factor at that time.

> *It must be acknowledged at the same time, however, that the bulls are responsible for nearly all the damage to the bigger 'top-canopy' trees.*

Cow herds comprise a number of adult breeding females and their respective offspring. The older cows have several juveniles and babies in tow. The younger cows have fewer dependents. When a breeding cow was killed, the big question was: *what do you do with her dependent calves?*

We shot them!

The emotionally-inspired alternative was that we capture the baby elephants (during the hunting operation), rear them in captivity, and release them where there was a need for elephants elsewhere. This would have involved a huge and immensely expensive additional work programme; AND, there was nowhere else in the country where we were short of elephants. In fact, EVERY national park and game reserve in Rhodesia, at that time, was also contemplating the need to reduce its elephant population. So, the alternative to shooting the juveniles and the babies – capturing them alive after we had killed their mothers – would have defeated the whole purpose of the population reduction exercise. It was also mightily impractical. So the decision was made that we just harden our hearts and get on with the job of slaughtering entire herds, right down to the smallest calf.

> ***The objective of the <u>external</u> population-reduction/hunting exercise at Hwange (1961-65) should <u>never</u> be forgotten. The objective was to reduce the elephant population <u>as quickly as possible</u>, so as to***

eliminate the huge and permanent damage that too many elephants were having on the game reserve's <u>internal</u> habitats. To have even considered capturing the babies would have been tantamount to accepting the unsupportable concept that the 'the-tailshould-be-allowed-to-wag-the-dog!'

It is now a principle of elephant population reduction programmes of any kind, that entire breeding herds – right down to smallest calf – be eliminated; and that 'other' breeding herds be left strictly alone. This policy achieves two desirable objectives: (1) It reduces the population numbers quickly, and (2) It minimises (or eliminates) the disturbance of all those breeding herds that remain alive after the population reduction is concluded.

In later years, when I had to contend with 'managing' elephant populations that had been established from cull-orphaned calves, we discovered that – having been reared without any kind of parental (adult) disciplining – the young elephant bulls (when they reached maturity) became very aggressive to anything and everything that crossed their paths. This included other elephants, rhinos and tourist vehicles.

In South Africa's Pilanesberg National Park, for example, young bull elephants (which were once calves that had been 'saved' from culling operations in Kruger National Park) took to killing white rhinos on a regular basis for no apparent reason. They also attacked tourist vehicles without having been provoked in any way. They only calmed down when bigger and fully mature elephant bulls were introduced from Kruger National Park – which belatedly instilled the discipline that the young bulls had lacked in their childhood and teenage years.

In the early 1960s, thoughts about selling elephant calves to zoos and zoo-parks all over the world were contemplated. One of the major problems with rearing the unweaned babies (and those orphaned in zoos), however, was that no zoological garden anywhere in the world had, at that time, developed a suitable milk formula to feed unweaned baby elephants.

A new departmental Deputy Director (Research) was appointed in the early 1960s. His name was Dr. Harold Roth. He was a German scientist who had done a lot of veterinary work with elephants in European zoos. When he learnt that we were shooting out entire elephant cow herds at Hwange, he sent down a kit (with instructions) to collect the fresh milk from elephant

cows that were killed during our hunting operations.

The procedure for collecting the milk was quite simple. The ‘kit’ comprised a bagful of small glass bottles (with sealable lids) into which had been poured a small quantity of liquid formalin. I was required to collect milk from every lactating cow elephant that I killed by simply squirting milk from the teats directly into one of these bottles. One bottle per cow. When full, the bottle was sealed, marked and re-committed to the bag.

A notebook had been provided, too, into which I had to record certain data about the kill. It was all a simple procedure that was easily fulfilled. As a result of this work, Dr. Roth was able to prepare a milk recipe that replicated natural elephant milk. The new milk formula saved many a baby elephant in the world’s zoos in later years.

I sampled the elephant’s milk, too, by squirting the milk from the elephant’s teat directly into my mouth. During the rains – when the elephants were eating mainly fresh green grass – I found the milk to be warm and rich and very palatable. It tasted much like fresh Jersey cow milk. At the height of the dry season, however – when the elephants were eating little other than the bark of mopani trees – the milk was so astringent as to be totally unpalatable. Indeed, just as soon as the milk entered my mouth, my whole mouth puckered up and rejected the bitter taste. It tasted much like bitter aloe. Yet the baby elephants drank it.

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