

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 3

A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails

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By Ron Thomson

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

(1955 - 1980)

In the beginning God created man the hunter

I learnt to hunt during my teenage years. By the time I moved into the realm of big game hunting (mid 1958 - aged 18) I had accounted for a great many of what are today called *African plains game* animals: steenbuck; grey duiker; oribi; common reedbuck; bushbuck; sable antelope; and kudu. I had also shot a fair number of bushpigs.

I hunted the pigs at night, on my belly, crawling up to them slowly on my elbows and knees, in the middle of mature maize (mealie) fields. I shot them with a 12 gauge shotgun using AAA shot. I never used a torch. I relied, instead, on the wind, my stealth and the bright light of a full moon.

By the time I started to hunt *The Big Five*, therefore, I had amassed a lot of general hunting experience and knew the importance of using the wind; how to stalk; and where to place my bullets to kill my quarry cleanly.

Nobody taught me how to hunt leopards - which provided my initiation into big game hunting. Here again, I taught myself. Before I became a game ranger I had shot seven leopards on my own, all by trial and error. I had wounded none and never did throughout my life.

After I joined the Department of National Parks (aged 20 - November 1959), however, an elderly game ranger in the Matopos National Park, Jurie Grobler, taught me how to set gin traps (*small* Canadian bear traps) to catch leopards. Although I myself have only ever caught one leopard in a gin trap, I *have* killed several that were caught in traps that other people - like Jurie Grobler - had set. I also hunted and shot with a rifle, a total of 14 leopards, for several different *management* reasons, during my 11 month sojourn in the Matopos. That was before I was posted to Main Camp, Hwange National Park.

Nobody taught me how to hunt lions either; although, I must say, I used the same trap-setting expertise that I had been taught by Jurie Grobler to set much bigger gin traps (*large* Canadian bear traps) to catch stock-killing lions. There are many *tricks* to setting gin-traps that you will only master if

you learn from expert trappers; and Jurie was such an expert.

Gin-traps? Leg-hold traps? NOT *sporting*! NOT *ethical*! Yes! Both true! You are right! But what you have to understand about any and all of my big game hunting adventures is that I did NOT hunt *for sport*. When I was employed by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management as a game ranger, I hunted because it was my job to do so. Most of the leopards and lions that I killed were stock-killers or man-killers (some lions were serial man- eaters). And the ethics associated with sport hunting did not apply. My job was to kill the quarry I was hunting - as quickly, as efficiently and as cleanly as possible. The primary objective was to *kill it*. Giving the animal a *fair deal* chance was not part of the equation. I had to kill lions and leopards - and sometimes hyenas - by fair means or foul. That often meant using gin-traps and sometimes poison.

If anybody *taught* me anything about *hunting* lions, it was my Msili Bushmen trackers - who had learned their trade from other Bushmen - from their big brothers, fathers and uncles; who had, in turn, learned their trade from *their* big brothers, fathers and uncles. I also learned a great deal by listening to and analysing lion hunting stories told to me (or told in my company) by experienced white game wardens and game rangers like Ted Davison, Bruce Austin, Harry Cantle and Tim Braybrooke.

So, no experienced game ranger - under any circumstances - ever held my hand when I trapped or hunted lions. I guess my bosses at Main Camp (the headquarters station of Hwange National Park), when I was cutting my teeth on lions - knowing that I had killed over 20 leopards at that stage - assumed that I would automatically be able to handle their much larger cousins.

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In 1960, Tim Braybrooke and I were the only two *single* game rangers stationed at Main Camp. We shared the single quarters and Tim was appointed my elephant and buffalo hunting instructor and mentor. I knew him from my school days. He had been three years my senior at Plumtree School where we had both matriculated.

My first experience at hunting buffaloes occurred in November that year - less than one month after I had arrived at Main Camp - when four large bulls

took up occupation of the lower reaches of the Dett Vlei on Dahlia Ranch. The cattle fence across the Dett Vlei - which separated Dahlia Ranch from the Sikumi Forest Reserve - was only 15 miles from Main Camp.

Buffalo carry two diseases that are fatal to cattle - Foot-and-Mouth disease and Corridor Fever (Theileriosis). When buffalo strayed onto the local commercial cattle ranches, therefore, it was Tim's and my job to eliminate them. The decision had been made - but not yet implemented (at the time *this* hunt took place) - to shoot every elephant and buffalo that we found outside the park anyway, because their excessively large populations inside the park were unsustainable.

It was believed that one way we could reduce their numbers inside the game reserve was to shoot any and all elephants and buffaloes that wandered across the park boundaries - anywhere.

Tim and I left the game reserve after lunch and, in a green government Land Rover, we drove down the dirt road that followed the edge of the Dett Vlei. We crossed the cattle grid at the fence, and proceeded along the road for another mile.

We found the four bulls easily enough. They were grazing off green grass in the middle of the narrow wet vlei. My recollection of them is that they were huge animals and in prime condition.

Tim stopped the Land Rover on the road opposite them and, climbing out of the vehicle, he buckled on his cartridge belt. He then took his .375 Magnum government-issue rifle from his tracker, Japan, who was sitting quietly on the back decking.

Very soon I was standing at Tim's side, with *my* cartridge belt around my waist and with *my* government-issue 375 Magnum rifle in my hands, too.

The buffalo had by then stopped grazing. They shuffled around until they were standing shoulder to shoulder in a row across our front, facing us. They held their noses high and looked at the stationary Land Rover with great curiosity. Every now and again one of them would blow a *pffffuuu* of air out of its nostrils - and shake its head. They were, however, not at all aggressive. And they were not afraid.

“O.K., Ron,” Tim said to me quietly. “Are you ready for this?”

“Uh-huh,” I responded nonchalantly - meanwhile, inside, my stomach was hosting a whole squadron of fluttering butterflies.

“Right.....,” he said. “You take the two on the right. I’ll take the two on the left.”

Then he added: “Body shots! No head shots. Go for the lungs. It is the biggest and most deadly target for a buffalo. Just remember... once we start shooting they’re not going to give you very much time. You are going to have to shoot fast and accurately.”

Tim looked at me speculatively. At that point he knew very little about me.

“You know where a buffalo’s lungs are.....? Don’t you? You’ve shot kudu before?”

“Yes..... To both questions. And lots of other animals. I know where the lungs are!”

What a strange question to ask me? I thought. Just as we were about to shoot four big buffalo bulls!

But Tim was just making sure. He smiled at me wryly. “I had to ask,” he stated the obvious. “You’ve never shot a buffalo?”

I shook my head.

“Well, it’s just like shooting a kudu,” he said with great patience. “Take your time. Place your shots well. And don’t panic if they run away. Keep firing bullets into their lungs. And concentrate on your own two animals. I will work on mine.”

“O.K.”

“Let me take the first shot,” he suggested, looking at the buffaloes. “My bullet will go into the vee of its chest.... I would suggest you wait until I have had that shot. Wait until your buffaloes are turning - giving you a good side-body shot - then slap a bullet into one of their lungs. Make sure that first shot is a good one. Don’t give that buffalo another one straight away. Go to your second buffalo and get a bullet into that one’s lungs, too..... Then take whatever shots present themselves. By then they will all be running away like

hell. Keep shooting at whatever lung you think you can hit.... until they go down."

All four of the buffaloes were still standing right in front of us in the middle of the vlei. They were all still very curious as to why we had stopped the vehicle and why we were now standing on the road. All four of them still faced us directly, with their noses held high. They couldn't have been any more that 50 yards away.

Tim took his shot; hitting his buffalo in the vee of its chest.

All the buffalo immediately spun round and started to run away. Tim's advice had been good. Wait for my shot, he had said. Wait for my buffalo to spin round. Wait for it to present me, briefly, with a perfect side-body shot. I was ready for it and I saw my bullet strike midway down the buffalo's body behind the shoulder. I had no doubt my shot had been good.

I recharged my rifle's chamber and kept an eye on my second buffalo.

The buffaloes galloped off across the vlei. Then they turned and ran to our right, racing up the far centre line of the wet grassland.

As my second buffalo turned with the other three, my next bullet ploughed into its rib-cage. It hit midway down its body, raking forward. I reloaded and hit it a second time in roughly the same place.

I reloaded again and prepared to have another go at it. At that stage I had no idea which of the four was my first buffalo. They were all running away together.

"You hit the first one well?" Tim asked me hurriedly.

"Yes."

"And the second one?"

"Yes," I responded, not taking my eyes of my target buffalo as it ran further and further away. *"I hit that one well, too - twice!"* I added confidently.

"O.K....." Tim spoke authoritatively. *"STOP... Stop shooting".*

My rifle was halfway to my shoulder. I looked at Tim and lowered it slowly.

"Stop shooting?"

“Yes,” Tim stated confidently. “I got in two good shots myself. You got in three good shots. That’s all we needed to do.”

“You shot twice?”

Would you believe it? I had not even heard Tim’s second shot.

“Yes! One bullet into each of my buffalo’s lungs. They were both good shots.”

“You said I should keep on shooting?”

“I know! But if you say you got one good bullet into each of your buffaloes, I believe you. So let’s just wait and watch... and see what happens.”

In the next few seconds one buffalo after the other began staggering in its galloping stride. They were no longer running in a coordinated phalanx, but deviating all around each other over the open grassland. And I could see blood.... lots of it!

One after the other they went down. Frothy pink blood gushed from their mouths and nostrils, and they began to bugle melancholy bellows into the air, their noses pointing to the sky.

“The buffalo’s swansong,” Tim explained happily. He had a grin all over his face. “That is a sound you will get to know very well,” he told me authoritatively. “When you are shooting rations buffaloes, which we will be doing every week very soon, just remember this hunt today. You will be shooting two at a time. Two in one day! So let today’s hunt be a lesson. Make absolutely sure of your first shot - make sure it is in the lungs. Then forget about it. Let that one run away. Go onto your second buffalo and concentrate on getting another good lung-shot into that one. And let it run away, too.

“Then you wait.... You wait to hear both buffaloes’ swansongs. If you have hit them properly they won’t run far. And you will hear them bellowing. When you do, you will know that both of them are down and out.”

The buffaloes had not run any more than 100 yards before they were all down. We recharged our magazines and pushed new rounds into the respective chambers. Then we walked over to examine the four big buffalo

bulls that we had killed.

We returned to Main Camp and Tim sent a 5 ton Bedford lorry, with a gang of labourers, to collect the carcasses. All four animals, duly gutted and quartered, were hanging in the Main Camp butchery by nightfall.

And I had shot my first two buffaloes!

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The young, single game rangers of Hwange, in those days, were forever being called out to attend to one problem animal complaint or another - outside and all around the periphery of the 5 000 square mile game reserve. The most common complaint concerned crop-raiding bull elephant when the native crops were ripening in the Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs), between January and May.

Attending to stock-killing lions was quite common, too. And, as regular as clock-work, whenever there was a major tropical storm in the farming districts at night, the telephones would be ringing in the Main Camp game warden's office by nine o'clock the next morning. For one reason or another, lions killed cattle whenever the heavens open up!

If you take the time to watch cattle - or game animals - enduring a major thunderstorm, you will see them standing perfectly still in the pouring rain; you will see them with their heads hanging low and their tails facing into the driving winds; and you will see the rain water pouring off their bodies in sheets. It must be very easy for a lion to kill a cow under such circumstances - and that, I believe (but don't know for sure), is why we received so many complaints on the mornings after big tropical thunderstorms had racked the district skies during the night.

At Main Camp we had much fewer complaints about leopards, but they happened every now and again. It was nothing like my experiences in the Matopos, however, where I seemed to be forever chasing down stock-killing leopards.

And every now and again, out of Main Camp, we had to deal with stock-killing spotted hyenas, too.

Buffalo complaints were relatively infrequent - except that from November

1960 onwards, we started shooting both buffaloes *and* elephants in large numbers when they strayed outside the park boundaries - whether they were crop-raiders or not. And in that respect, we were infinitely more occupied in the Tjolutjo district's teak forests, to the southeast, than anywhere else.

The extensive teak forests of Hwange National Park and those in the Tjolutjo TTL, were all part of the same extensive habitat; and (in 1960) there was only an unfenced dry and fossil river course - a long, narrow and sandy depression - separating them. Furthermore, the elephants and buffaloes of Hwange had been using both forest areas as their continuous and natural habitat for many years – especially during the wet season when seasonal pans (natural depressions in the ground) in Tjolutjo were full of rain water.

The ration buffaloes were all shot relatively close to Main Camp inside the national park.

In those days the only available game rangers to do this work were Tim Braybrooke and myself. I was then just 21 years old and had arrived at Main Camp in October 1960. One of Tim's priority assignments, therefore, was to put me through a crash course in elephant hunting. I could not be unleashed on elephants - it seemed - until I had been adequately schooled. During my few short training months, I virtually became Tim Braybrooke's shadow.

Although I did not know it then but, on the day that Tim and I shot those four buffalo bulls together on the Dett Vlei, I began - and completed - my buffalo hunting training. After that hunt nobody ever again tried to teach me anything about hunting buffaloes; nor did any more experienced hunter ever accompany me on a buffalo hunt.

However proficient I became at hunting buffaloes, therefore, I learnt by trial and error - and from a great deal of passive instruction from the Bushman trackers that I used throughout my big game hunting career. As their fathers and brothers, and peers, had taught *them*, so my trackers taught *me*.

I arrived at Main Camp with a lot of leopard hunting experience. But nobody instructed me on the trapping and hunting of lions or hyenas. My only guidance and support in this respect, too, came from those of Main Camp's

Bushman trackers who accompanied me on my various hunts. They all, very quickly, became my friends and incidental mentors. I had no qualms about admitting my deficiencies in those days, or of learning from the Bushmen. What better people could I have ever had to teach me?

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I had killed an elephant bull, on my own, when I was living - and working for the UK Atomic Energy Authority - at Macaha, in 1959. It was not a very exhilarating experience - and I did not conduct myself very well (because of my total lack of experience). I was also completely ignorant about tracking in those days - which caused me to totally lose that elephant's tracks after I had fatally wounded it. So, I guess, I can truthfully state that at the time of my arrival at Main Camp, in October 1960, my elephant hunting experience was zero.

Tim and I were called out in November 1960 to shoot a crop-raiding elephant bull at a native village called Juapi - eight miles north-east of the little railway town of Dett. Tim's personal Bushman tracker, Japan, picked up obvious footprints in the garden that the elephant had raided the night before, and we followed those tracks into the surrounding *gusu* (teak forest). This was my first experience of following *spoor* (= sign = tracks) and I was absolutely fascinated.

We found the elephant dozing away the midday heat, deep inside the forest. Tim killed it cleanly with a single side-head shot into its brain. He had instructed me beforehand, however, where to find an elephant's brain from the side; and, as we approached that bull that day, he insisted that we both fire simultaneously into its head.

Getting me to shoot in tandem with him that day, was Tim's way of giving me my first experience of shooting and killing a reasonably large elephant bull from a really up-close range.

The range was about 10 yards, which I had thought, at the time, was ridiculously close. I believed Tim had been irresponsible in taking us in that close and that he was *showing off*. But I was soon to learn that 10 yards - and closer - was a good and normal range for shooting elephants. In fact, 10

yards soon became, for me, not close enough.

I was under no illusions that Tim had killed that elephant that day - not me. And I knew he would have done the same efficient job without my help. Both our bullets - *bang-bang* - one after the other - traversed the animal's skull and whistled out the other side.

The elephant fell towards us and hit the ground flat on its side. Immediately its top back leg lifted and began kicking the air convulsively. I could clearly hear the hip-joint articulating violently with each jerking kick. It was a liquid sound that, over the next two decades, was to become very familiar to me. It was one of the sure signs that told me that the elephant I had shot was dead.

Using the dead elephant as a model, Tim taught me how to get my bullet into the brain from the side. My first important lesson, he said, was to learn how to find an elephant's brain from the side. *That was the FIRST shot I had to perfect!* Other lessons - finding the brain from different angles - would follow later, he said. But they never did. I had to learn all those extra tricks of the trade by trial and error myself.

When taking a side-head brain shot, he told me, to find the brain: *You have to draw a line between the elephant's earhole and its eye; you locate a point that is one third forward of the earhole along that line; and you place your bullet into the elephant's head at that place.*

That formula works well. It worked like a charm for me over the next several months - and I killed many elephant bulls, cleanly, with a single shot as a consequence.

I biggest problem I had was in weaning myself from that simple and very effective killing shot - and in finding the brain from other angles. Nevertheless, for several months after that initial instruction, I religiously manoeuvred myself into position to make sure I was able to take that deadly side-on head shot. Only when I was unexpectedly charged down by a very irate and very large elephant bull one day, did I realise that I had to become much more broadly proficient.

Tim spent some time that day, instructing me on the different shots one can use to kill an elephant. The brain shot was the most important one, he told me. It was also the most difficult and complicated - when you start looking

for the brain from different angles.

The lung and heart shots, I found out, are little different to those on any other animal - but Tim did not favour them as first option shots. Why? Because he believed the brain shot could not be bettered.

He also taught me about two other shots that I had never heard of before: *the hip shot and the spine shot*. Both these targets, he said, are only taken when you have wounded an elephant and it is running away.

The hip and spine shots are not comfortable subjects to talk about - in any circle - but they are ones that every elephant hunter needs to know. They are used when a hunter has had a go at the elephant's brain - or lungs - or heart - and missed the vital organ. The wounded elephant will then run away and present the hunter only with rear-end targets. He **MUST** then use one these alternative targets - the spine or the hip - to bring down the fleeing animal.

When an elephant is running directly away from him, the hunter *cannot* shoot it in any of the usual fatal places - the brain, the heart, or the lungs - because all he can see is the animal's rear end.

For the hip shot to be effective you have to place your bullet right *into* one of the two hip ball-and-socket joints. They are not difficult to find. They are located - left and right - on either side of the animal's anus. When the elephant is running away from you, you can clearly see those joints articulating. The target is about the same size as a human head.

The hip shot cripples the elephant because it renders the injured leg unusable. An elephant cannot even *walk* on three legs! Once you have anchored your wounded elephant in this manner, you can then run up real close, and quickly dispatch it with a bullet through the brain.

The spine is similar to the hip shot insofar as it will also anchor your wounded elephant and give you the opportunity to kill it quickly.

The spine is easily seen from behind. It is the long column of thick backbone that stretches from the root of the animal's tail right up to the topmost part of its rump - and beyond. It protrudes as a long thick ridge in the middle of the flat pelvic plane. It is, therefore, very clearly recognisable from the rear. A bullet placed accurately into the middle of the spinal column instantly breaks

an elephant's back and renders *both* hind legs inoperable.

I was fortunate to have had an experienced mentor to teach me these lessons. Just knowing about the hip and the spine shots made me more much comfortable within myself, because I realised that even if I wounded an elephant and it ran away, I had two additional options to bring it down. Gaining confidence in such matters is one of the routes to proficiency.

During my long big game hunting career I have wounded several elephants that ran away, but most of them I was able to bring down before they were out of sight by using either a well-placed hip shot or a well-placed spine shot. And out of the 5 000 odd elephant I have *hunted*, only two have ever run away wounded, never to be seen again. That is a remarkable record of which I am particularly proud; and I attribute my success, in this regard, to the fact that I perfected the hip and the spine shots.

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The week following our killing of that first bull elephant together, Tim and I were again summonsed to Dahlia Ranch. This time it was to dispatch a bull elephant that had taken to smashing the cattle paddock fences and to chasing the native ranch hands all over the teak forest.

It required no tracking because one of the herdsman took us straight to where he had last seen the delinquent animal. It was still there, standing quietly in the teak forest some 100 yards off the cattle fence jeep track. It was not a very big animal but it was certainly adult. To me, during those early days of my elephant hunting career, however, *every* elephant was BIG.

It had heard the vehicle approaching and was standing dead still; with its head up; and with its ears lying flat against its shoulders. That stance, I was to learn later, was a dead giveaway. It tells the hunter that the elephant is alert; that it has heard our approach; and that it is listening intently.

Tim stopped the vehicle and switched off the engine. Immediately the elephant started to sidle through the forest away from us. It was putting distance between us but, at the same time, keeping a visual tab on what we were doing.

Tim and I, Tim's personal Bushman tracker, Japan, and another tracker - mine for that day - started to hurry after the elephant keeping it within our sight all the time.

The leaf litter was dry, ankle-deep and noisy, and despite us moving with caution the elephant heard us approaching from a long way off. When we closed the gap to 50 paces, it took to its heels and started running like the wind. Somehow it had sensed that we were not simple herdsman, but something very much more dangerous.

Tim did not let the elephant get out of rifle range. He picked up his weapon and slapped a bullet into the animal's lungs. "*Go for the lungs,*" he shouted at me as he worked the bolt - running.

In a short space of time, between the two of us, the elephant had had five or six solid .375 bullets banged into the lung area of its body, all hitting behind its exposed left shoulder. Then it really took off, giving us only occasional glimpses of its buttocks. Tim picked up his rifle to have a go at the spine.... but he pulled his weapon down when he saw the blood.

The elephant kept on running whilst a deluge of blood was pouring out of its trunk... pink, frothy blood... blood mixed with air from the animal's lungs.

"*It's finished,*" Tim shouted as he ran alongside me. But he didn't stop running.

Up ahead I saw the elephant falter. It slowed right down and began trumpeting loudly: a squawking, bubbling, liquid sound. It was a cry full of anguish and horror. Very soon it was just ambling along... swaying from one side to the other in an uncoordinated fashion. It screamed and thrashed around, swishing its trunk from side to side, and the pink frothy blood, all the while, kept gushing out.

Then the stricken old bull stopped dead still and it tried to trumpet, without success. Its front legs splayed wide as it fought to keep on its feet. From its throat came bloody gurgles of resonant, gasping moans. Its whole body was racked with huge spasms of shaking convulsions.... and it stood there... anchored, at last, because it could no longer breathe.

Tim and I raced on. When we caught up with it Tim, not apparently

concerned at being within-touching-distance range, ran around the animal's hindquarters and stood right beneath its huge head. He placed a bullet into its brain and hurriedly backed off as the elephant's body fell towards him when it collapsed in death.

When the elephant hit the ground, it rolled over onto its side. Its top back leg lifted and began kicking the air convulsively. Again I heard those liquid sounds as its foot kicked, and the hip joint articulated in its death throes.

That hunt was a useful, if gruesome, exercise because I saw the whole horrid charade of an elephant's death by lung-shot. The dying action was prolonged and agonising, and the animal was, all the while, clearly terrified. It must have known - in those last few moments before Tim put a bullet into its brain - that it was most certainly knocking at death's door. What I realised at once, however, was the fact that, with a bullet through its lungs, no elephant on this earth was going to run very far. So I understood the value of the lung-shot. In later years, it became one of my *last chance* alternatives that saved me, many times from having to make the ignominious report to my superiors that I had wounded an elephant; and that it had run away.

The lung is a very big target. It is much bigger than the heart and infinitely bigger than the brain. It is a target, therefore, that can be hit quite easily even when the wounded animal is running off in thick bush. But - having just witnessed the whole unadulterated process - I agreed with Tim that the lung was NOT a preferred first target. Last ditch option? YES - most definitely! But NOT the first choice!

I asked Tim why he had taken the lung-shot that day - having just told me, a few days before, that it was NOT his recommended first-choice target. He told me that he had sensed that that wily old bull was going to be running in front of us all day long - keeping just out of harm's way - and that he had no wish to spend the whole day following it from pillar to post. So, when the lung-shot presented itself - after the elephant had started its run - he had taken the opportunity to save us a gruelling day of tracking. He had not, therefore, specifically, taken the lung-shot to demonstrate - for my benefit - its attributes. But, he said, he was quite sure it had achieved that purpose, too. He wasn't wrong.

I was, therefore, lucky to have had Tim Braybrooke appointed as my tutor and my mentor - for many reasons. He was a good teacher.

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The idea of eliminating elephants and buffaloes when they wandered across the national park boundaries was very new to everyone, especially to those of us who lived and worked inside Hwange National Park. But the national park's game rangers were available to do the job. We were capable of doing it. We were equipped to do it. And we set about getting it done with vigour and with enthusiasm.

It was mainly Tim and me who carried out this task - very soon independently of each other - for the next 18 months. Then Tim got married and was transferred to Victoria Falls. After that I carried on, on my own, for the next year and a half. During that latter period I was required to train two new young rangers how to shoot elephants.

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In December 1960, Tim and I were the first two game rangers in the country to ever conduct an elephant and buffalo elimination exercise outside the national park boundaries.

Our trip to the Tjolutjo teak forests that month was also the first time that Tim and I had gone on a patrol - for longer than one day - together. We camped at Ngamo just outside the park boundary, not far from the village of an Ndebele (Matabele) headman called Mazai.

The Tjolutjo TTL, in those days, was occupied by just a smattering of Ndebele subsistence farmers. Today it carries a much denser human population.

We decided to begin our work by tackling a handful of elephant bulls that were not only regularly crossing the park boundary - and living for extended periods outside the game reserve (as many of Hwange elephants did *every* wet season) - they were also raiding the local Ndebele people's crops and vegetable gardens.

This was an exciting and vital period of my life. I was just starting the kind of work that I had yearned for since I was a little boy. And what Tim and I

had been tasked to do on that patrol was beyond even my wildest dreams.

Our camp that first night - and for several nights thereafter - was set up under the canopy of a huge camel thorn tree on the edge of a wide, flat, short-cropped grassy plain. Although we had government tents with us we did not erect them. There was no sign of rain so our stretchers and other camp equipment - including folding metal tables and canvas chairs - were laid out on top of a very large tarpaulin groundsheet. Paraffin Tilley pressure lamps lit up the campsite.

After supper Tim got out his guitar and for an hour he plucked away expertly at the strings, softly singing one campfire ditty after another. This was a part of his persona that I did not know and I discovered that he had a surprisingly pleasant voice.

Across the campfire from us, our three Bushman trackers squatted on their haunches, listening with rapture and watching in silence.

The trackers kept the camp fire stoked throughout the night. Tim and I slept in our camp beds on one side of the burning logs; and the Bushmen slept under their blankets, on another tarpaulin, on the opposite side of the fire.

I lay for hours in my camp bed that night listening to, and absorbing, all the nocturnal sounds. I watched, through the tree's canopy, the stars and the galaxies slowly swinging around the heavens on their blue-black tapestry. This was the essence of life. I revelled in every moment.

How I ever slept on those early nights in the *real* African bush I shall never know. I simply could not get enough of the wilderness ambience, and every moment that I slept denied me some sound, some smell, some experience that I did not want to miss.

All night long there were intermittent *gnu* grunts from the several small herds of blue wildebeest that lived out on the open plain. And there were laughing flute-like calls from small groups of Burchell's zebra that intermingled with the wildebeest. There were the haunting calls of owls and the ghoulish howling and yapping of black-backed jackals. In the early hours of the morning I was awakened by the loud and continuous roaring of lions. They sounded to be not too far away in the dense forest behind our camp.

Ngamo, in those days, even outside the game reserve boundary, was a wild and wonderful place. There were few people and a lot of game, and the teak forests were pristine.

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During the night a small group of elephants drank at the pan right in front of our camp. The natural depression - 75 feet across - was full of crystal clear rainwater from a month of heavy downpours, and there was a profusion of water lily leaves spreading across its surface. The lilies had not yet flowered because the summer season was then still young.

In the first flush of the dawn, shortly after a hurried breakfast, we took up the elephant's tracks of the night before. Neither Tim nor I had then yet learned to bide our time; and to start our journey on fresh elephant tracks only later in the day. We were still to realise the advantage of consistently finding our quarry when the elephants were quietly dozing during the heat of the day. It was only in retrospect that I put two and two together and realised that Tim Braybrooke, himself, was then not fully conversant with elephant behaviour. In those days, I believed he was all-knowing and all powerful! He was my guru!

Japan was again Tim's tracker of the day. Indeed, the Bushman was Tim's right-hand-man and they were rarely out of each other's company.

Sumbe - who was Bruce Austen's longstanding personal tracker and patrol assistant - had been allocated to me that day. I had no choice in the matter. I was the new boy on the block and had to take whichever tracker I was given. Bruce was the senior game warden at Main Camp and, as he had climbed up through the ranks, so his work had become ever more administrative. Sumbe had, therefore, become somewhat redundant as the big boss's tracker. Still he was a Main Camp personality of some note and, because he had been Bruce's tracker for many years, he was considered to be the *most senior* tracker on station. That did not mean he was *the best* tracker. Japan, for example, was certainly much more proficient than Sumbe.

Our third tracker on that patrol was Mbuyotsi but he did not accompany us on the hunt that first day. Instead he remained behind to look after the camp.

In those days, we were not at all concerned about local people pillaging our

unattended camp. Robberies in the Rhodesian bush were very rare. The native peoples of the country respected everybody else's property, and it would have been a matter of great tribal shame if any of their number were to be convicted of theft.

Things have changed over the years! In Africa, today, you cannot trust anyone!

Our *open* camps had to be manned at all times, however, because marauding vervet monkeys and baboons were the common villains.

In some places - especially in the early mornings and evenings - hyenas were also troublesome; and they chewed on *anything and everything*, including tin plates and mugs.

All the Main Camp trackers were Msili Bushmen. They were affiliated to the Tjolutjo Msilis of Salankomo - a scion of the much larger Msili Bushman settlement from across the border in Botswana at Zibaninni. The Msilis are the eastern-most Bushman tribe in the Kalahari - and the Salankomo group were the only Bushmen resident in Rhodesia.

Sumbe was very conscious of the fact that he was Bruce Austen's tracker. This caused him to have a somewhat obnoxiously superior and arrogant streak. As was the case with all the Bushman trackers, however, there were good points and bad points to his character. On *that* patrol, he and I struck up a solid friendship that was to last until his death (by cancer of the throat) twenty-three years later.

Japan was an altogether different kettle of fish. He was flamboyant and overly confident (in my humble opinion) but he served Tim well and faithfully for many years; and that - in a game ranger/tracker relationship - is really all that mattered.

With my then very limited experience, I judged Japan to be, by far, the best tracker I had ever seen working in the field. He impressed me every time I worked in his company and I learned to respect his capabilities. But I could never have worked with him. Our *haloes* just *did not merge!*

I was beginning to understand that the relationship between a hunter game ranger and his tracker was a very delicate, personal and unwritten contract. I

picked this up very early on as a consequence of watching Tim and Japan working together on the hunt. The hunter game ranger and his personal tracker *have* to have a very special rapport. And their relationship *must* be of the highest possible order because not only does the success of their hunts depend upon it, often their very lives do, too.

A good relationship between a game ranger and his tracker has many mutual benefits - which the reader will come to realise as my stories unfold.

There was a vibrant hierarchy within Main Camp's Bushman tracker community. A tracker needed a personal game ranger-boss of some stature - like Bruce Austen - to hold him up, and to perpetually keep him up, above the level of mediocrity against which his peers all measured themselves. And the higher the officer rank his game ranger-boss attained - or the acknowledged better quality of his big game hunting skills - the greater rank did the tracker attain within the ascending order of his own community.

A hunter game ranger, on the other hand, is an absolute nobody - within the rankings of *his* peers - without him having the permanent services of a highly skilled tracker. This is easily explained. If a hunter game ranger never finds the quarry he is hunting - because his tracker is useless - he can never attain a state of hunting excellence.

There is more! The tracker must have absolute confidence in his master's killing and hunting abilities. If he does not have that confidence, he is likely to desert his master at critical times during dangerous hunts - to save his own skin. And that happens only once - because it immediately dismembers the team!

The two of them - hunter and tracker - must also be prepared to hold each other's lives in their respective hands. And I was soon to find out, they are required to do this more frequently than most people think.

The hunting success that a hunter game ranger achieves is, to a very large extent, a direct reflection of his tracker's ability to follow and to properly interpret spoor. The game ranger, in turn, however, must also develop enough tracking expertise to be able to accept or reject his tracker's interpretations with confidence. It is not good enough that the game-ranger-hunter simply accepts everything that his tracker tells him. A strong and

sympiotic mutualism - between game ranger and tracker - is, therefore, required to bring consistent big game hunting success.

Nowhere is the concept of *team spirit* better exemplified than in this partnership.

The game ranger/tracker relationship, over time, develops into something a lot more important than just friendship. It is above *love*. It goes far beyond what a husband and wife experience in their marriage. The relationship is wholly profound; and as time wore on, my understanding of this fact grew. Throughout the 16 year long Bush War in Rhodesia (1964 - 1980), for example, when my trackers and I were regularly required to track down and engage Zimbabwe's so-called *freedom fighters (terrorists)*, I was left in no doubt about this reality.

During my early days at Hwange, I did not have a personal tracker; and I was to learn that you didn't just *choose* one from amongst Main Camp's tracker fraternity. Neither does a tracker *choose* a game ranger with whom to work. The selection process is much more complex and infinitely more subtle than that. It is a condition of partnership that evolves into a state of perfection over time. The magnetism that eventually binds the two together is an enigmatic *something* that happens or it doesn't. This may not have happened with other game ranger/tracker teams, but it certainly happened with mine.

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The hunt that day was entirely dependent upon Tim and Japan. Japan took up the spoor and Sumbe, working alongside him, played second fiddle. Despite Sumbe's higher status in the pecking order, I soon worked out that Japan was by far the superior tracker. Sumbe acknowledged this, however, and regularly deferred to Japan's judgement on the state of the tracks. This fact made the connection between Tim and Japan much more understandable.

Both trackers carried a full canvas josak (waterbag). The water in the bags kept reasonably cool because there was always minuscule evaporation from the constantly damp canvas. Japan also carried Tim's rifle. Sumbe carried mine.

Tim followed immediately behind the trackers - contributing meaningfully all the time to their team-work task. I took up a position at the rear, observing

everything that was taking place.

The two elephant hunts that Tim and I had conducted together in recent weeks were nothing like what I began to experience when we set off on the spoor that day. I sensed immediately that *this* hunt was *different*. Today I was going to find out what elephant hunting was *really* all about.

The tracks were fresh and they led us into some dense teak forest that was heavily invaded by spiky sickle bush and hook thorn scrub. Mixed up with coppicing teak saplings, this heavy understory comprised the infamous and dense *sinanga* - a notorious ten foot tall thicket that grew in profusion throughout Kalahari sand teak forest complexes.

The going was slow because we had difficulty following the elephants through the *sinanga* - which our quarry simply pushed straight through. In many places we had to abandon the spoor, walk round the densest thickets, and pick up the tracks on the other side.

The wet season had set in. Everything in the forest understory was lush and in full leaf. Fresh green *Panicum maximum* grass grew to near waist-height under the spreading teak canopies. There were a few open glades but, generally, visibility was down to zero.

It was exciting hunting. The tracks were obvious in the damp Kalahari sand. The fresh green grass had been trampled flat wherever the elephants had walked; and they ate it all along the way. We walked through the forest constantly in an atmosphere permeated with the cloying scent of must - exuded from the elephants' sweating temporal glands. The oily discharge was smeared all over the leaves and twigs of every bush they brushed past.

I was in seventh heaven; and all the while my body tingled with suppressed fear and glowing anticipation.

Both Japan and Sumbe agreed there were seven big bulls in the group; and their early assessment later proved to be correct.

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We found them feeding in the teak forest just after nine o'clock. They gave their position away long before we actually saw them - by the sounds of their feeding and the deep resonant growls that emanated from somewhere deep

down in their throats.

The old-time hunters called these growls tummy rumbles but they are nothing of the kind. The growls are a voluntary vocal emission that elephants use to communicate with each other constantly. Unlike a tummy rumble, they can switch their voices on and off at will.

Tim tested the wind with his ash bag, and brought us in close to the nearest bull from a downwind direction. Then, as we were closing the final gap - out of the blue - he told me to prepare myself to take the first shot. He had shown me *how*, now he wanted me to demonstrate that I had learned what he had taught me.

My training had been rudimentary, my experience was limited, and doubts I had aplenty. But I was not going to give up on this unexpected opportunity.

My friend and mentor was standing just behind me and to one side. He was ready to back me up should I make a mess of my shot. Tim had been in my position himself not so long ago. He knew that I *needed* this opportunity. He knew that I *needed* the confidence. He also knew that I would never become a competent elephant hunter until I understood that I was capable of killing an elephant with a single bullet through its brain.

We approached *very* close. That morning we moved in much closer to my target than I had ever previously been, on foot, to a live wild elephant. And there was not just one elephant. There were seven of them, all standing relatively close to each other. I was very conscious of the fact that any one of them could have me pancaked on the ground in a matter of seconds.

Every one of the bulls was much bigger than either of the two elephants Tim and I had recently killed. And, as with all Kalahari sand elephants, their tusks were not long but they were very thick.

My body crawled with nervous tension. My whole being quivered in anticipation! At such close range the only thing that stood between me living, and me dying, was my ability to place that tiny 300 grain .375 Magnum solid bullet, *in the right place*.

The sinanga was very thick. Far from being a hindrance, however, it now

helped mask our approach. The forest's thick carpet of discarded dead leaves was damp underfoot. That made our approach relatively silent. Everything, therefore, was in our favour.

To say that I felt fear that morning was an understatement. To say that I held my fear on a very short rein may well have been true, but that does not describe the sensations that raged within my heart and soul. My intestines churned. And I cannot adequately describe the wild and woolly notions that ran rife through my head.

Tim oozed confidence. It was catching.

At about eight yards range, he brought me up to the closest bull's left flank. It was broadside on to me. I could not have been better positioned. I lifted my rifle, aimed, and quickly punched a bullet into the elephant's temple. It hit the animal one third forward of the earhole along the imaginary line that I had drawn between its earhole and its eye.

The elephant dropped as if pole-axed. As had occurred with the Juapi elephant, its hindquarters collapsed first. Its head threw up, flicking its trunk skywards, and its huge body crashed onto the ground with a momentous thundering impact. I could feel the reverberations through the soles of my feet. It did not, however, roll over but remained propped up on its brisket.

The instant the shot was fired, the other elephants burst into action. They disappeared into the thick forest undergrowth as fast as their long legs would carry them. One moment they had been standing quietly alongside us. The next they were gone.

This, I was to discover, was the normal reaction of bulls in bachelor groups. When the first shot is fired each animal's inclination is dominated by its individual desire to survive.

In their wake, despite the dampness of the leaf litter underfoot, the elephants left us standing in a huge pall of dust.

"STAY WITH IT," Tim shouted in my ear. Then he, too, was gone.

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Tim disappeared into the forest, running flat out behind the fleeing

elephants. Japan raced after him, the fat josak in his right hand swinging wildly.

The elephants ran fast and furiously. The two hunters were right on their heels. I could hear the abrasive, rasping of rough skins rubbing against rough skins as the big bulls jostled in their flight. I could hear the pounding of their huge feet. Trees and branches splintered and there were continuous scraping sounds of heavy bodies ploughing through the sinanga.

All these noises gradually receded into the distance - until Sumbe and I found ourselves surrounded by an immaculate silence. No bird sang. No cricket cricked. The wind had even stopped blowing.

For a few moments I was mesmerised by the silence. Tim had instructed me to: *Stay with it*. I presumed he had meant that I must stay with my downed elephant to make sure it was dead.

My elephant was dead all right. It lay quite still in front of me, propped up on its brisket. It had died instantly when my bullet turned its brain into bloody porridge.

Looking at my elephant close-up left me with a feeling of incredible wonder. I was not prepared for its huge size. It was a *really big* bull. I felt proud, humble and sad all at the same time. I had, at last, killed an elephant cleanly, with one shot, on my own. That had been one of my life's ambitions!

And forever thereafter I thought of THIS elephant as my *first*.

"It is dead," Sumbe announced at my side.

He held out his hand and shook mine in the white man's congratulatory fashion. He said nothing more but there was an infectious grin on his face. He knew exactly how much this moment meant to me. And I suddenly realised that, in the not too distant past, he had probably shaken Tim's hand, too, when he had killed *his* first elephant. I suspected that a lot of young game rangers had passed through Sumbe's hands at this salutary moment of their elephant hunting careers.

The Bushman drew what must have been an incredibly sharp penknife from his trouser pocket and he used it to quickly and expertly cut off the end of the elephant's tail just above the tassels. He tied the long stiff hairs together to

form a makeshift loop handle.

At that moment Tim began shooting. The shots came from some distance away, deeper inside the forest.

“Bhaaam.... Bhaaam”. There was a pause. Then there was a third shot: *“Bhaaam”*.

One. Two.... Three. I counted them.

The reports sounded hollow... flat... without life. Their energy.... their resonance... had been absorbed by the thick foliage of the forest.

“Bwuya!” Sumbe shouted urgently. *Come!* And he took off running in the direction of the shooting. Rifle in hand, I ran behind him.

The sinanga thorns tore at my clothes and at my bare legs, arms and face. Fabric ripped. Blood flowed. I felt nothing.

Underfoot I saw the spoor of the running elephants in the soft yellow sand. We ran past broken branches and fresh green leaves on the ground. I was amazed. Sumbe was not just running at full speed. He was following the tracks, too.

Four hundred yards on, my tracker came to a sudden stop. We were both out of breath. Our breathing was laboured. Our throats burned. Our hearts pumped. Our pulses thumped in our ears.

All around us the high trees of the forest stood dense and hostile, their canopies touching, intertwining, above our heads. The silence was tangible except for the thumping sensations of our hard beating hearts. Not a sound came out of the thick bush all around.

Sumbe stood immobile. He cast his head at the ground. His eyes were shut. He was listening. I listened, too.

All I could hear was the heavy pounding of my heart and the reciprocal pulse that thumped away in my ears.

Unexpectedly, Sumbe lifted his head to the sky and gave vent to a loud *whooping* call - in two syllables - the last part rising to a crescendo. It sounded just like the whoop of a spotted hyena.

It was answered by Japan. Japan's return communication, however, was the quiet *where are you... I am over here*, whistle that is used by a lone guineafowl when its flock has been disturbed and scattered. This was something else I was going to have to learn. The Bushmen used common and familiar animal and birdcalls to communicate their whereabouts when their party was separated. And they were good at it.

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Japan and Tim were located not fifty yards away to our front left. Sumbe had found them very easily in the vast and dense forest. He had gauged the distance with absolute accuracy. I was impressed. We had been running on the tracks, that I knew, but the tracker's sense of distance was incredible. He had heard the shots and knew just how far away they were.

Within a year, and with a great deal more experience under my belt, I discovered that I was unconsciously starting to develop the same kind of capability.

We walked quietly onto Tim and Japan. They were each sitting on the shoulder of two different elephant carcasses - huge bulls. Both animals, ten yards apart, were lying on their sides amidst heavy foliage.

Tim was sucking noisily on his josak. A grin split his face from ear to ear.

"Your jumbo dead?" he inquired.

"Dead as a doornail," I confirmed, trying to hide my excitement and pride. Tim nodded his approval.

"You get two?" I asked, thinking there might a third elephant lying dead in the bushes nearby?

Tim nodded.

"I heard three shots!"

“This one needed a second...” he said, patting the animal he was sitting on.

“Three down... Four to go,” Tim said after he had handed the josak back to Japan.

“They stopped running?” I asked him. I wondered if that was not a stupid question! How else could he have caught up with them so quickly?

“They nearly always do,” Tim explained. “After the first shot is fired - and they don’t know what the hell is going on - they normally run like the devil for a couple of hundred yards. Then, when they feel safe, they stop and turn round to listen - to evaluate what is going on - to get their bearings. They normally stop as a group. So, if you run after them when they first take off, and keep on their heels, you sometimes get another chance to kill a couple more.” Tim grinned. “And that’s what we did.”

“And where are the others now?”

“Now they will keep running until they are really tired. Then they will walk... fast! They will only stop for a siesta at midday. And that could be ten miles away.....”

“So, now what do we do?”

“We pick up the tracks.... If we are lucky we will find them exhausted and dozing away the hot midday hours in the shade of some big Mchibi tree. And when we do catch up with them there is a good chance we will get the remaining four.”

The Mchibi tree is also known as the ‘false teak’. It is a bigger tree than true teak and it grows in isolated places throughout teak forest complexes. It is an evergreen - whereas the true teak is deciduous - and it casts heavy shade throughout the year. Elephants know where all the big Mchibis are located and the old bulls seek them out for their midday siestas on very hot days.

“And the three jumbos we have just killed? What do we do about them? If we go off on a new hunt, how will we ever find them again to collect the ivory?”

Tim laughed.

“When we get back to camp this afternoon we will take a ride up to old Headman Mazai’s village,” he explained. “We will tell him about the elephants we have killed and tomorrow he and his whole village line - men, women and children - will follow our tracks and they will find the elephants, all three of them. They will strip the carcasses of their meat - every scrap. Nothing goes to waste.... and Mazai will chop out the tusks. It will be his responsibility to clean them and to store them safely at his village - until you or I return to Ngamo on another hunting expedition. And at the end of that next hunt, we will collect these tusks and take them back to Main Camp.

“Taking responsibility for the tusks, and for cleaning and storing them, is his way of paying for all the free meat we have provided him and his people”.

I smiled - and nodded. Now I understood a little more about how the system worked.

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We resumed the hunt. There were still four elephant bulls on the loose at Ngamo and we intended to find them and to shoot them that same day. And to find them, all we had to do was to follow their very obvious tracks.

The trackers again carried our rifles. The day was still young.

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Fifteen minutes later we cut the spoor of two buffalo bulls.

Spoor includes ALL the various signs left by an animal as it walks or runs through the bush. Spoor tells a tracker every detail about the

animal's passage. These signs include footprints; scrapes on the ground; a freshly shifted pebble or log; green leaves lying on the ground; fresh bruise marks on plant stems or on tree trunks high above the ground - caused by an animal's body pushing past; trampled grass; wet mud on a tree trunk; the condition of dung and urine patches; the damp or dry condition of soil that has been disturbed by a passing foot – relative to recent rain and/or its exposure to the sun and wind; and a great deal more.

The tracker's correct interpretation of the state of desiccation of green leaves; and of the soil; and of dung and urine patches - both in the shade and in exposed positions in full sun - tells him when (how many hours ago) the animal passed by that way. This requires that he understand the different rates of leaf desiccation that occur within a wide range of different plant species and/or environmental conditions. He has to know, therefore, that some plant leaves will dry relatively quickly (even in the shade) whilst others will look fresh for many hours (even when they are lying in the hot sun).

It is their ability to correctly interpret all these signs that separates the good trackers from the mediocre ones. Being able to see and to follow foot marks, therefore, is certainly one thing that ALL trackers have to be able to do; but if they cannot correctly interpret what they see, they are not much good to their hunter-game ranger masters.

As a consequence of their constant exposure to the practices of tracking - over many years - some of our better white game rangers became astounding trackers in their own right. Many, in fact, surpassed the tracking capabilities of even the above-average native trackers. I never, however, ever met a white game ranger whose tracking abilities came anywhere near those of the Msili Bushmen - who were masters at their craft. And, in my opinion - when he got into his stride - my Bushman tracker, Ben, was the best there ever was.

We all looked down at the sign the buffalo bulls had left behind. Dragging out from the front of every deep foot impression, there were two grooves

where the animals had laboriously pulled their cloven hooves forward over the deep and soft Kalahari sand. This was typical of old buffalo bull tracks in the teak forest.

The tracks told us our *dagga boys* (old and muddy buffalo bulls) were plodding on to *somewhere* and that they were in no hurry to get there. The spoor was fresh. It was on top of the elephant sign - and that was no older than 30 minutes.

It was Sumbe who first saw the blood. It was smeared on the green leaves of a teak sapling that one of the buffaloes had brushed past. Tim and both trackers then descended onto the tracks and followed them a few paces into the forest. There they found yet more blood.

“One of these buffaloes is bleeding quite heavily,” Tim said, turning to me, indicating that he wanted me to also examine the blood spoor.

Tim looked off into the forest in the direction the buffaloes were heading. He had a worried frown on his face.

“I think we are going to have to follow this wounded buffalo and sort it out,” he said, pondering our options.

“You think somebody has maybe shot it?” I asked, offering a possible explanation.

“Either that,” Tim replied, *“or the lions we heard roaring last night had a go at it. Either way I think we must kill it before it takes out one of Mazai’s people.”*

“So we leave the jumbos?”

“They won’t go very far,” Tim assured me. *“We will pick them up again tomorrow or the next day. From the amount of spoor we’ve seen I’d say they have been around Ngamo for some time.”*

Tim turned his attention back to the tracks in front of him - making an analysis.

“This spoor is very fresh,” Tim opined. “And they are moving slowly. We might just pick them up right away.... then we can get back onto the jumbos.”

We decided to follow the buffaloes. And that set the stage for one of my most terrifying buffalo hunts of all time.

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Tim took his rifle off Japan. He re-checked that he had four rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber; then he reset the safety catch. He made a silent gesture with his face and eyes that told me I should take my rifle from Sumbe, too.

I checked my own rifle and put it on safe. My mentor clearly believed this was necessary. He obviously recognised there was an important difference between hunting elephants and hunting a wounded buffalo in thick teak forest.

Tracking the two buffaloes was just as easy as it had been tracking the elephants. The ground all around was still soft Kalahari sand and it was damp from recent rain.

We had not gone very far before we heard the *swooooooshing* snort of a buffalo up ahead. It was a sound that, in the coming months and years ahead, was to become very familiar to me. It was a buffalo's soft alarm call, warning other buffaloes that danger lurked nearby.

We all froze solid.

This was a new experience for me. It was also very frightening. I felt uncomfortable hearing that blowing confirmation of a known wounded buffalo in the forest up ahead. And, looking at the dense brush all around, my heart began to thump.

Had the buffaloes got our scent? I wondered. *Had they heard us?*

Whatever! One way or the other they had detected our presence. There was no doubt about that. They now had the advantage because they knew we were present with them in the very thick sinanga.

Tim stopped, took out his ash bag and tested the wind. The cloud of white dust blew this way and that. The breeze was whimsical. In general, however, it was moving obliquely past us.

The puff of ash had not moved in the direction of the buffalo. They, therefore, could not have smelt us. Neither could they have seen us - for visibility was down to no more than 20 feet at best; and to zero in many places. So the buffalo must have heard us. Although they knew that *something* was in the thicket with them, therefore, they could not have known, for sure, *what* it was.

Tim turned to me and to Sumbe. He put his finger vertically across his lips. They pursed in a silent *shushing* gesture.

At least we now knew that the buffalo were no more than 50 yards ahead of us.

Standing in front of Tim, Japan looked over his shoulder - waiting instructions. Tim flicked his hand with the middle finger almost imperiously extended. It was the silent *forward* command that all us hunter game rangers used to tell our trackers to keep following the spoor.

It was impossible to move quietly through that heavy-leafed teak forest, with its multiple saplings and its interlacing understory of hook-thorn and Chinese lantern *sinanga*. We did our best. That exercise, however, taught me one thing: just how very much more acute was the buffalo's hearing compared to that of the elephant.

The buffalo were now fully alert and they clearly heard our every movement. We hadn't gone ten more yards along their tracks before we heard them

crashing off into the forest ahead of us.

When we came to the spot where they had been lying down, we discovered a fresh pool of blood in the sand. The wounded animal was bleeding profusely.

We kept on the spoor. The running hoof prints were now deep gouges in the sand. They were not difficult to follow. But we were unable to close with our quarry. Each time they stopped the buffaloes stood and waited for us, listening for our approach. Then they galloped off again. We bumped them up four times in the next thirty minutes, whereafter Tim called a halt.

“We’re never going to catch up with them like this,” Tim announced flatly. “But there is something wrong. These buffs have only been travelling a few hundred yards before they go to ground again. They should be miles away by now.”

“The wounded one,” I volunteered. “It’s holding up its brother?”

“Could be something like that,” Tim agreed. “But what they are doing is not normal.”

I made no further comment.

“I’ve been thinking,” Tim continued. “Old Mazai has a pack of dogs back at his kraal. Maybe he’d be prepared to lend us a hand with them.”

I must have looked sceptical.

“If we could get the dogs to bay up the wounded buffalo, it would make it much easier to kill,” Tim stated his reasoning.

I didn’t know any better. I had no experience in such matters. So I shrugged my shoulders eloquently and pulled a noncommittal face.

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We walked back to camp which, by the straight shortcut the trackers took us over, was surprisingly close. We had been walking in circles! I changed my tattered shirt and we drove to Mazai's village.

We were respectfully received without any kind of subservience. Mazai was a grand elderly native of the old school and he was rightfully proud of his Ndebele connections. He had bold white marks all over his dark face and brown hands, the scars of a bad burning accident when he was a child.

Mazai was delighted when we told him about the three dead elephants *and* when Tim informed him he could have all the meat. Tim also, and immediately, charged the old man with collecting, cleaning and storing the ivory. He and Tim had had this kind of conversation several times before, so it was familiar territory to them both.

Without hesitation Mazai not only agreed to lend us his dogs, he insisted on coming with us so that he could direct and control them on the hunt.

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The trip to Mazai's village cost us two hours of hunting time. Even so, it did not take us very long to get back to the spot where we had abandoned the hunt. I was absolutely amazed that the trackers were able to find it so quickly - and so easily - in that never-ending and seemingly featureless forest.

Once we were back in the thickets, the dogs - five mangy village curs - did not seem to understand what was required of them. Mazai whistled and cajoled them but it did not help. They just ran amok around our heels, in disarray.

"Follow the tracks," Mazai urged Japan. "Once we are on the spoor the dogs will realise what is expected of them."

I had my doubts. It seemed the dogs were worse than useless and that they would be more of a hindrance than a help. I became convinced that our trip to fetch them had been a complete waste of time. And, by that stage, the sun

was well past its zenith.

The trackers took up the spoor and we set off again in pursuit of the buffalo.

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A few hundred yards later the Bushmen stopped and conversed. The buffaloes, it seemed, had parted company. They told Tim of their conclusion. I stood back, said nothing and listened.

“Go look for the tracks with the blood,” Tim instructed the trackers. *“We’ll stay here and wait for you.”*

Japan retraced our spoor, back-tracking the single set of buffalo tracks he had been following. Sumbe followed on his heels - looking all the time to either side of their route; looking for blood.

Then Sumbe moved off on his own - to the right of Japan’s back-tracking route. He went searching in a wide arc for the other set of tracks. This is what we called a 360 degree search for spoor. It normally brought rapid results.

The thick forest quickly absorbed both trackers - and silence reigned.

Tim explained quietly: *“The buffalo have split up and there is no blood on the spoor we have been following. We have been on the wrong set of tracks and I’ve told the Bushmen to sort it out.”*

After that short pronouncement Tim, Mazai and I stood silently together under the wide spreading canopies of the teak. We were closely surrounded by the heavy green leaves of the understory. The dogs stood around, or lay around, idly panting at our feet. We said nothing. We waited. We became a mute little island of humanity in a sea of green foliage, each lost in our own thoughts.

Tim quietly withdrew a soft pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and

tapped one up with an expert flick of his finger. He wrapped his lips round the end of the protruding cigarette and, with a quick lift of his head he pulled it from the pack. He lit it with a match and drew the smoke into his lungs with obvious pleasure. Exhaling the smoke slowly, he blew several smoke rings into the clear and uncontaminated air. All three of us watched the rings waft off on the breeze. They disintegrated only when they hit the wall of twigs and greenery that surrounded us.

A quiet lost guineafowl whistle came at us out of the teak forest behind. Tim acknowledged it with a similar call. "*Sumbe has found the right set of tracks. He's found the blood.*" He told me obliquely. He had instantly recognised Sumbe's tone in the whistle - which I thought was remarkable.

Tim removed the half-smoked cigarette from his lips and flicked it onto the forest floor, amongst all the dry dead leaves.

I looked at the smouldering fag end with disapproval.

Tim noted my dissent and laughed. "*It's O.K.,*" he remarked somewhat embarrassed. "*The bush is too damp at this time of the year to go up in flames.*"

Mazai bent down and snatched the still burning cigarette off the ground. With a beaming face he placed it between his lips and took a deep draw - sucking the smoke into his lungs. He nodded his approval. Nothing goes to waste in Africa!

Tim smiled at Mazai and he looked at me with raised eyebrows. *Problem solved!* his silent gesture inferred. I smiled and shook my head.

Tim returned the soft pack and the matches to his breast pocket - but not before he had stuffed a wad of paper into the match box. I was pleased he did so because there is nothing more off-putting than walking through the bush with somebody with a rattling box of matches in one of his pockets.

Having completed the ritual, Tim set off wading through the heavy foliage in

Sumbe's direction. I tagged on behind. Mazai followed. And the dogs followed Mazai.

After a few re-directing guineafowl whistles, we caught up with Sumbe. Japan had already arrived. Nobody said a word. Sumbe made a silent gesture towards the fresh buffalo spoor he had found, and he lifted a sprig of blood smeared leaves for Tim to examine.

"Landa!" Tim instructed without further ado. *Follow the tracks!*

We set off again, this time on the correct buffalo's spoor. The dogs scurried along at Mazai's heels accompanied by my silent scorn.

Half a mile further on, the dogs whipped off past our heels and disappeared into the undergrowth ahead. They had smelled something, or they had heard something, for they were now intent upon hunting. They had started to function as Tim had envisaged they would. This brought a beam of happiness onto the Mazai's face. And I had to swallow my many recently unspoken words.

Presently there came the sound of bushes being thrashed; and the dogs began barking furiously.

The rumpus was coming from our right front. The dogs had bayed something up in the dense undergrowth about fifty yards from our position. We all believed it to be the buffalo.

In confirmation, I then heard the sound of a big animal blowing air heavily through its nostrils. This was followed by a series of heavy grunts. The dogs *had* tagged the wounded buffalo.

Our hunting party had come to a standstill in a long line, along an old elephant path that the buffalo, for a short time, had been running along. Japan was at the front followed by Tim, two paces behind. I was five paces behind Tim and Sumbe was right on my heels. Mazai was three paces behind Sumbe. Everybody's head was turned towards the ruckus, their ears focussed

on the sounds the buffalo was making. My heart was beating like a drum.

The next thing we heard was the sound of pounding hooves as the buffalo tore through the heavy brush. It sounded as if it was coming in our direction. Then I *knew* it was.

Nobody had to tell me we were being attacked. Nobody had to tell Mazai or the trackers either. One moment they were standing alongside us. The next they were gone.

I suddenly felt very angry. The trackers had abandoned us! Then, in the same instant, I understood. They knew that, under the circumstances, they could not help so they had dived for cover.

Sumbe was lying flat on the ground inside a scrubby teak coppice right at my feet. He was doing everything that he could to make himself disappear. I could not see Japan. When I looked for Mazai he was nowhere to be seen.

The Bushmen's survival instincts are very strong. And they have many ingenious ways of avoiding injury when big game animals attack. Evaporating into thin air seemed to be one of them.

In a flash Tim and I found ourselves standing alone, five yards apart - on the same straight elephant path that we had been walking along with the group. We had both turned to face the invisible but now obviously charging buffalo. The bush was so thick visibility was down to a matter of feet.

There is no getting away from a charging buffalo. Running doesn't help and rarely is there a suitable tree close at hand to climb. In this case - as in most cases when a buffalo charges you down - there was, anyway, no time to climb a tree. What was happening was happening at an incredible speed. Tim and I were, at that moment, faced with one of only two options: to kill or to be killed! And THAT is the essence of buffalo hunting. THAT is what makes buffalo hunting so exciting some times, and so dangerous and compelling.

Tim and I were both surrounded by heavy-leafed teak scrub. On either side of the path the sickle bush grew thick. There were sprawling hook thorn bushes everywhere.

I looked towards Tim. The only open corridor through the sinanga was along the old elephant path - and even that was heavily overgrown. Like me, Tim was facing to his right front, accepting the buffalo's challenge. Our eyes and our brains were both focussed on the same thing - the rapidly advancing and very angry buffalo. The ambience of the moment was dripping with our fear and with the buffalo's malevolence.

The bull was charging us on sound alone. At that moment the wind was in our favour so it could not be otherwise. It had heard us coming and it was rushing at us in a speculative manner. That told me this buffalo was VERY angry. It was sore from its wound - whatever had caused it - but from the sound of its attack, it did not appear that the wound had incapacitated the animal in any way at all. It was coming at us full bore!

It had clearly taken aim at the sounds of our approach and was rushing at us, expecting to find us - to see us - when it had finally closed the gap. And if it passed us by, without seeing us, it would then undoubtedly pick up our scent and follow its trail. It would be *that* determined! This was one very angry buffalo.

I listened to the advancing tornado, trying to assess where and when it would come into view. And as it drew closer, I was considerably relieved to realise that it was not coming towards me. It was charging directly at the point of our caravan! It was going straight for Tim.

Very soon, the pounding of the buffalo's hooves swamped our thoughts. There were splintering sounds of bushes being crushed under the weight of its racing passage. There were episodes of *shushing: shush-shush.... shush... shush*. These were the intermittent noises made by the animal as it forced its big body racing through one heavy pocket of sinanga after another. And there was the intermittent *snap* of dry sticks breaking beneath its feet.

Then I saw the jerking, shaking bushes as the buffalo smashed its way through the last of the intervening undergrowth.

With each pounding beat of the buffalo's front hooves on the ground, it expelled loud snorts of breath through its nostrils: *pHhaahhh... pHhaaahh... pHhaaahh...*

All these sounds caused panic to whirl around deep down inside my soul. I could smell my fear. My mind was awash with bizarre images and thoughts, but my reaction was stoic. Nevertheless, it took all the will and determination that I could muster to stand my ground; and to await the arrival of that angry buffalo.

Tim stood like a rock. I couldn't even begin to imagine what was going through *his* mind. He, too, must have realised that he was the buffalo's principal target.

My own mind was a wild kaleidoscope of thoughts and visions. I fantasized about all the conceivable things that *could* be happening - that I imagined *were* happening. I thought about the unimaginable damage that this buffalo would do to our feeble bodies if we failed to kill it - to *Tim's* feeble body if *he* failed to kill it.

The key to our salvation seemed to rest with Tim and with Tim alone. In my mind I was out of the equation. I was a mere spectator. It seemed, in those few short moments of time, when the buffalo was closing the gap that I was not in any way a part of the scene. I could not *believe* that I was actually *in it*. What was happening was an illusion. I was in denial.

The closer it got, the more obvious did it become that the buffalo was aiming for *Tim*. It was definitely *not* coming at me. Whilst I felt relieved, I was frightened for Tim.... and I was, deep down, very frightened for myself, too.

The big buffalo bull broke cover. There was first a flash of shiny black horn tips. Then came its head - which was up high - high and bouncing. And its black eyes were blazing as it searched ahead for sight of its adversaries.

This animal was looking for trouble. There was no doubt about that. And it was prepared to bring that trouble to the pestering hunters that were pursuing it so relentlessly.

I saw the flash of horn and head before Tim saw anything. I was looking at it from a slightly different angle! My sights moved onto target but by the time I was ready to pull the trigger, all sign of it had disappeared back into the sea of greenery.

The seconds flashed by as though time did not exist. What occurred during the next few moments is still indelibly imprinted on my soul. It all happened so fast, so quickly, yet, as is always the case with hindsight, it all seemed to be in extreme slow motion.

Tim was waiting for the buffalo to present itself; waiting for a target that he could shoot at. The butt of his rifle was on his shoulder. His cheek was pressed up against the stock.

For several long seconds more, all Tim could see were shaking bushes as the buffalo raced towards him. He needed a target. He needed a good head shot to kill the buffalo cleanly, instantly. It was the only way he was going to come out of this encounter alive. He also knew that to place a *snap* bullet accurately into a charging buffalo's brain, under these circumstances, was going to be well nigh impossible.

Tim would have but one or two seconds to place his shot before the buffalo hit him. Its head would be bouncing up and down fully two feet with each galloping stride. He had only one chance to pull off a miracle. There would be no time for a second shot. If he did not hit the brain with the first one, the impact of the bullet alone would not stop the buffalo's charge.

There was a flash of horn. Then Tim saw the buffalo's head. Instantly its rage-filled eyes focussed on the waiting game ranger. The contact was now fixed. It was visual, both ways, and very tangible. For Tim, the buffalo's terrifying charge had become personal - very personal.

Life now hung in the balance for both Tim and the buffalo. One or the other - or both - was about to die. For both of them their moments of truth had arrived.

Tim focussed his sights on the bouncing horns. Then, when the buffalo's huge head burst through the last of the heavy brush, he targeted those menacing eyes. The buffalo's nose was high. Tim squeezed off his shot at point blank range.

The buffalo - travelling at thirty miles an hour - was ten feet from him when Tim's bullet hit the heavy boss. Hitting the boss was no problem. Modern high velocity steel-and-lead bullets are capable of penetrating the heavy horn. It was the positioning of the bullet strike, therefore, that was important. Tim's bullet had flown true but, by the time it left the barrel, the buffalo's head was falling. Instead of smashing through brain - which is located immediately below the boss - the bullet passed through that honeycombed structure of the skull a fraction of an inch above the vital organ. The small 300 grained solid .375 Magnum bullet exited at the rear base of the boss and entered the animal's neck, and it lodged in the heavy muscle and bone between the shoulders.

The impact had absolutely no effect. The African buffalo is a very tough customer.

Tim leapt backwards and to one side of the buffalo's angle of attack. In the process he became heavily entangled in a hook thorn bush directly behind where he had been standing.

In that split second, I knew that Tim had missed the brain; and that it was now up to me to achieve the impossible. My rifle had been following the buffalo's unseen progress through the heavy brush - following the line of moving bushes. So I was primed and ready to pull off a shot.

Tim had backed off the elephant path to my left. That gave me a clear line of fire directly along the path in front of me. Out of the corner of my eye, I

could see Tim hooked up in the sinanga. He was working his bolt frantically. The buffalo had not yet crossed the path.

I had about one foot of space between the left hand edge of the path and Tim's body; and about two feet of space over the pathway itself. My rifle was aimed along the right hand edge of the path - waiting for the buffalo to cross over. I was ready to pull the trigger the moment the buffalo's nose was in my line of fire.

Incongruously, Tim's wide-brimmed bush hat had been pulled off his head and it was hanging from the outer branch of the hostile hook-thorn tree that now held him. The hat was poised five feet above the elephant path and it swayed with Tim's every movement. It was a serious distraction from the grim task that I now had to perform. The hat filled my thoughts when my mind should have been concentrating on something infinitely more important.

It was *then* - thank God - that I saw Japan. He was curled away inside another hook thorn bush beyond where Tim had been standing on the path. He had been in front of Tim tracking the buffalo, when all the action had erupted. His instinctive reaction had been to run forward and he had ploughed straight into the hook thorn bush - and became terribly entangled. And there he now stood - facing back towards both Tim and me, quiet and immobile - watching and waiting for the final act of the hunt to take place.

Japan was in my direct line of fire. I was actually aiming at his midriff when I saw him. I swung my weapon marginally to the tracker's left hand side. My rifle was now aimed down the centre of the eighteen inch gap that existed between Japan's body and the place where I expected the buffalo to emerge.

All these impressions, comprehensions, sightings, evaluations, calculations, and minuscule alteration of plans of action, occurred in a flashing instant of time.

And time had run out!

The buffalo's nose came into view on the right hand side of the path. Then its head appeared. Its enraged eyes were focussed on Tim's struggling body hanging helplessly in its path.

Tim, with a new round up the spout, was frantically trying to bring his weapon to bear on his target! It was a forlorn hope. The buffalo's forward storm was infinitely faster than any speed Tim's hands and arms could possibly muster.

As the buffalo dropped its head to smash him, Tim threw himself still further backwards. This pushed him even deeper into the hook thorns. There was nothing more he could now do to avoid the racing, raging inferno of fire and brimstone. At that moment in time, Tim Braybrooke was staring death in the face.

The central base of the buffalo's thick neck was now in line with my sights. I pulled the trigger. It was anybody's guess as to where that bullet was going to end up.

Miraculously, the buffalo's front legs collapsed the instant my bullet hit it. It did a nose dive right at Tim's feet, its chest hitting the ground with a God almighty thud. Its back legs careered upwards; and its huge body did a full somersault in the air, smashing into the hook thorn bush that was tying Tim down.... brushing inches past the game ranger's body.

As the buffalo's carcass flew past Tim's body - a hair's breadth separating the two - it took the bush with it, ripping the hook-thorns from his flesh and clothing; freeing him instantly from captivity. The buffalo's heavy carcass hit the ground a second time and came to rest ten feet beyond where Tim was standing.

The big black monster disappeared from my view. Tim ripped himself free from his last remaining constraints. He turned and fired into the space behind him where the tumbling carcass of the buffalo had come to rest.

One... two... three.... four shots rang out. This emptied Tim's rifle.

I reloaded my own weapon from my cartridge belt, and I raced towards where Tim was still firing his salvo. I reached him just as he fired his last round. A great gouge in the sand of the elephant path at Tim's feet - where the charging buffalo's chest had hit the ground - testified to the closeness of their encounter.

The buffalo was lying inside a small open glade that had been behind Tim when he had faced the charging buffalo. The animal's stretched out carcass was not moving. It was clearly very dead.

I stood at Tim's side and, when I looked down at the carcass of the dead buffalo in front of us, my whole body began to shake. I had no control over the heavy convulsions. My face flushed with heat. The next moment it went icy cold. The danger was over but the tension in my soul hummed with a vibrancy that had a life of its own.

Tim placed the butt of his rifle on the ground, and with the muzzle propped against his stomach, he took hold of my right shoulder with his left hand and he turned me to face him. There were dribbles of blood running down his face - and from multiple heavy scratches on his naked arms - where the hook-thorns had ripped him; but the smile on his face was indelible.

He looked me in the eye and silently stretched out his right hand. We shook hands - looking knowingly into each other's eyes - without a word. There was nothing that either of us *could* have said at that moment, or *wanted* to say.

Moments before, I had saved Tim Braybrooke's life. He knew it. And I knew it too. Thank God I had been with him on the hunt!

Next, Tim took out his pack of cigarettes expertly, flicking a single stem out from the packet and getting it between his lips. But when it came to extracting a match from his matchbox, his wildly shaking hands and fingers dropped them all; and they lay scattered all over the Kalahari sand at his feet.

“*Fuck it!*” he exclaimed crudely. The words dripped with his exasperation. Nothing was going right for him today!

Without a word, Japan came over and squatted down in front of him. He picked up the matchsticks, one by one, and put them all back into the matchbox.

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The charge of that buffalo was one of the most dangerous I have ever experienced. In fact, that buffalo hunt ranks amongst the top ten most dangerous and most exciting big game hunts with which I have ever been involved. It just happened that it was my second buffalo hunt, and that that bull was only my third buffalo kill. It was a baptism of fire! And it taught me from the very beginning of my career to have the greatest of respect for this sometimes terrifying beast.

When the excitement was over, Tim’s nerves remained in a mess. When he wasn’t hunting he chain-smoked with an almost nervous intensity. He never finished a cigarette, flicking each half-smoked fag away from him with well practiced fingers. The old butt was rarely burnt out on the ground, however, before he had a new one in his mouth.

His incessant smoking caused Tim to develop a nervous cough. It became a repetitive part of his persona and gave rise to his Bushman nickname. The trackers called him *Makwethlela – The One Who Coughs!* He was never awarded an African *honour name* probably because his nickname was so apt!

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My bullet that day had been a very lucky strike. A total fluke! It passed through the buffalo’s neck, smashing the vertebrae close to where the neck meets the shoulder. It thus instantly paralysed the buffalo’s body and all four of its legs - in full charge - which was why Tim Braybrooke survived that day.

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The buffalo had been wounded in the buttocks with a .303 bullet - which we dug out of the animal's heavy back leg muscle. It had not been an incapacitating wound but no doubt a painful and irksome one. It had bled profusely and wept gallons of transparent serum.

We later discovered that it had been wounded by a German missionary from the Regina Munde Mission, 20 miles south-east of Ngamo. It was one of six buffaloes the missionaries had shot that month - without a licence - ostensibly in protection of their crops. It emerged later, however, that they had really shot those animals for meat with which to make their locally famous German sausages.

Tim and I investigated the matter thoroughly and we pressed criminal charges:

(1) For hunting without a licence; (2) For not reporting the wounding of a dangerous animal; and (3) For using a calibre smaller than a .375 Magnum on dangerous game. On hearing about the pending court case (from a pleading telephone call from the missionaries themselves), the Director of National Parks instructed us to withdraw the charges - because, he said: *"It would look bad for the department to take men of the cloth to court."*

I have always wondered what the Director would have said had I not accompanied Tim Braybrooke on the hunt that day, and had that buffalo killed him!