

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 2

A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails

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By Ron Thomson

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

A buffalo hunt extraordinaire.

In 1961 I was a 22 year old game ranger stationed at Main Camp, Hwange National Park, in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In those days the park was called *Wankie*

After three decades of buying beef for native labour rations from a nearby farm butchery, at the beginning of 1961 we began shooting two buffalo bulls a week, inside the park, to feed our native staff. This was a sensible thing to do because, at that stage, it had been scientifically determined that the game reserve was carrying far too many buffaloes anyway. It became one of my many tasks to shoot these ration animals.

In those days there were only four field officers resident at Main Camp: Bruce Austen - the senior game warden-in-charge of Hwange National Park - whose job had become mainly administrative; Harry Cantle - a senior game ranger - whose principal responsibility was to keep the pumps and engines of the park's 14 (in those days) artificial game water supplies running; and there were two single game rangers, Tim Braybrooke and myself.

Tim and I did practically all the *mundane* field work that emanated from the Kalahari sand areas of Hwange (which amounted to seven-eighths of the 5 000 square mile national park). This included all the problem-animal/controlled-hunting of elephants, buffaloes, lions, leopards and hyenas outside the park in the surrounding areas. And because I was the most junior officer on station, most of this work was shunted on to me. So I was almost constantly in the field hunting. I did not complain!

There is nothing wrong with buffalo meat. It is much the same as beef except that it is a bit tougher and richer in flavor. Tim and I both lived in the single quarters at Main Camp and we subsisted almost exclusively on meat from the ration buffaloes that I shot. We ate buffalo mince, fillet steaks, liver, tongue and tail until we had it coming out of our ears, every day of the week.

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I set out before dawn one November morning to collect our two buffalo bulls for rations. As usual, I went to the teak forest (called *gusu* by our Bushman trackers) just outside Dett village. Dett was where all the steam locomotives' engine drivers, firemen, and guardsmen, and other railway personnel, lived. Yes, in 1961, the Rhodesia Railways was still then served by coal-powered steam locomotives! Dett was located 11 miles from Main Camp on the railway line national park boundary. Our search for fresh spoor started, as it always did, on the sandy railway fireguard track a mile or two outside Dett.

Four Bushman trackers accompanied me that day: Sumbe, Ben, Mbuyotsi and Rojas. Sumbe, Bruce Austen's personal tracker and patrol assistant was - because of his association with the boss-man of Hwange - the lead tracker that day. Ben, who I was later to discover was THE most brilliant tracker, and who became my life-long tracker and hunting companion in the years to come, had not yet entered my life in that special capacity.

I needed four men with me on these hunts because the carcasses had to be gutted and quartered (without skinning) in the field, loaded onto the Land Rover, and returned to the Main Camp butchery.

The rains had broken early that year and the grass stubble on the treeless and annually burnt-off railway fireguard was sprouting green. We found the tracks of seven buffalo bulls that had spent the night grazing on the fireguard. The dirt road was crisscrossed with their spoor for upwards of a mile out from the first brick houses of the Dett village.

It took Sumbe and Mbuyotsi some time to sort out which tracks to follow because the buffalo had been moving in and out of the forest edge throughout the night. Working out the spoor was made doubly difficult because, although there was clearly only one group of animals, they had been well spread out. In addition, they had been grazing there every night for the last week. So the trackers had to unravel what we called *yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's tracks*, too. That was never an easy task.

At the crack of dawn it was decidedly cold outside, so I remained in the Land Rover's comparatively warm cab whilst the trackers sorted out the spoor.

The forest foliage was damp from an intermittent drizzle during the night and the light breeze blowing over it acted like a refrigerator fan.

After twenty minutes, Sumbe emerged from the forest and stood on the deeply wheel-rutted sandy road to signal me. With a swing of his arm he indicated that the buffaloes had, at that point, finally entered the gusu and walked southwards.

I climbed out of the Land Rover buckling on my cartridge belt. It was a fearsome weight that day and it was to be my closest companion until dusk. The belt was heavier than normal because I was, for the first time, using my brand new .458 Magnum rifle. My belt's usual load of 25 x .375 Magnum cartridges had been replaced with 25 x .458 Magnum shells. Instead of bullets carrying 300 grains of steel and lead, therefore, the new cartridges were each loaded with bullets weighing 500 grains!

I took off my thick jacket and laid it on the Land Rover seat. The cold then really hit me but I could not wear it on the hunt. By ten o'clock the sun would be baking hot and we would then have no need for jackets; and I had no intention of lugging mine around with me all day long.

I tested the wind with my ash bag - filled that morning by Ben with fresh white wood ash from his last night's cooking fire. I flicked it on an outstretched arm and watched the puff of dust that floated off on the breeze. The wind was blowing from south to north. That meant - because the buffalo were moving south - we would be walking with our noses directly into the wind. That was great. We could not have asked for better hunting circumstances.

Sumbe waited for me to reach him and, when I did, he briefly explained what the trackers had discovered. We walked into the forest to where the others were waiting. Rojas and Mbuyotsi were each carrying a heavy canvas water bag (josak).

"Hendeyi," I said to Sumbe. *Let's go!* It was time to get the show on the road.

The buffaloes had walked through the gusu in a loosely scattered formation.

They were still grazing. The tracks were easy to follow on the crisp, damp, sandy soil. The green leaf-cover was thick. The sinanga (understory thicket) was dense beneath the teak trees and its sicklebos bushes were sporting cascades of delicate purple-and-yellow Chinese lantern flowers. And the hook-thorn brambles that pervaded the sinanga were covered in fuzzy yellow catkins. It was the start of the hot wet season - summer in Rhodesia - and the vegetation was responding to the early rains.

The buffaloes' stomachs were loose, the result of eating too much fresh green grass on the fireguard stubble. Their scattered diarrheal splats covered the bushes all along their tracks. Very soon, therefore, we were soaked from the rain-wet foliage, and covered with buffalo excrement from the waist down. So we stank, heavily, of fresh buffalo dung.

In less than half-an-hour we entered an area of open woodland. Here the canopy teak trees were far apart; there was no sinanga understory; and the sun penetrated right down to the ground.

I was freezing cold and shivering; and immediately began to glow in the tepidity of the sun's early morning rays. They stroked my bare arms and legs with a balmy and seductive touch; and the soft heat penetrated directly onto my back through my light-weight khaki shirt. The sudden warmth was euphoric and it turned my mind away from the task at hand.

All around us were clumps of coppicing teak scrub, sprouting from the ground in tight stands of twenty to thirty saplings. Each coppice was 10 feet across at the base, 15 feet in height and, because the sun fully penetrated to the ground, they were bedecked in heavy green foliage from top to bottom. They looked like an army of independent Christmas trees, their full green skirts touching the sand; and between them there were three or four foot wide avenues of bare yellow sand.

Enjoying the rays of the warm sun, my mind was in neutral. I followed Sumbe automatically as he twisted and turned through the coppices, religiously following the buffaloes' tracks.

Then, right in front of him, there was the scrabbling sound of a buffalo

getting up from the ground. This was followed by a loud *whooooooshhh* - the noise an alarmed buffalo makes when it blows air heavily through its nostrils.

Sumbe dived into the middle of the coppice on his right hand side. One moment he was right in front of me, the next he was gone.

Mbuyotsi, who had been directly behind me, read the signs immediately! He also disappeared I know not where!

I instantly pulled my rifle into my hands. I had been carrying it in a leisurely fashion, the fore-piece resting on the top of my right shoulder. My fingers had been wrapped around the pistol grip in my right hand. The fore-piece slapped into my left hand as I brought the rifle to bear, my thumb automatically flicking the safety catch off. In a flash I was ready for action. I stood my ground.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, I was face to face with a befuddled and totally bewildered buffalo. It had rushed around the coppice alongside which I was standing. Ten feet separated our respective noses.

On seeing me, the buffalo's surprise was quickly replaced with belligerence. Its eyes focussed on me with a look of absolute malevolence. It threw its head up high, its nose pointing directly at my face. A loud *pfuussss* burst from its nostrils! And in the minuscule space of time that it took for all this to happen, I knew it was on the brink of launching an attack.

For a brief moment I stood still. Our eyes met. I was well inside the buffalo's attack circle - that invisible zone around every animal which, when penetrated by a hunter, *always* results in an instinctive attack. The buffalo, at such close quarters, was mentally programmed for assault. Attack was then its spontaneous means of defense.

The rifle butt was on my shoulder. My eyes sought out the foresight bead. I snuggled it inside the *vee* of the back sight and I placed the bead on the buffalo's nose. At the precise moment that the buffalo launched its attack I pulled the trigger.

The recoil kicked my upper body backwards. The impact of the bullet stalled the buffalo's charge even as it began; and its shoulders and head were instantly retracted into the heavy foliage behind it. Intuitively, I knew my bullet had missed the brain.

We had walked right into the middle of the seven buffalo bulls we had been following. Feeling the warmth of the hot sun on their bodies, they had stopped to bask in its rays - as we were enjoying those same hot rays, too. And, one by one, they had bedded down in the scattered open spaces between the coppicing teak. There they had been dozing away the early morning hours in the warm sunlight, chewing the cud.

The alarm snorts of the buffalo Sumbe had disturbed, and the rifle shot, alerted the others to our presence. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, they now knew we were amongst them. None had scented us because the wind had been in our favour. And then, not knowing exactly where we were located, they all got up and ran wildly, in every direction, passed and around us. For several long moments pandemonium reigned.

I rammed another round into the chamber. Simultaneously, two buffaloes burst through the foliage three or four paces away, on my left hand side. One or the other of them was going to hook me with its horns as it raced past. Shooting the one and not the other, therefore, would not have helped. And there was absolutely no time to even think about my predicament.

I dived into the coppice behind me to find Mbuyotsi already in occupation. I lay there quietly with the Bushman. We looked at each other, wide-eyed, as the big buffalo bulls ran around, within touching distance, outside the flimsy screen of greenery that concealed us. The buffalo could smell us now, but they didn't know where we were. And they were panicking. They were in total disarray.

Suddenly, they got their wits about them and stormed off, as a group, with their noses into the wind.

Only when I heard their hooves pounding into the Kalahari sand floor of the

forest, getting ever further away, did my body relax. I was shaking like a leaf. So was Mbuyotsi. Cowboys don't cry. But they are allowed to be afraid sometimes!

The encounter had been a close call - a very frightening experience. And as Mbuyotsi and I crawled out from our retreat, I called out Sumbe's, Ben's and Rojas' names. All three answered. I was relieved and very glad we had all survived.

In the turmoil that followed my shot, the buffalo I had hit had run off with the others. And the sign, all around the place of the shooting, told me that it hadn't even fallen down. Buffaloes are very tough customers! Head shots - unless they hit the brain - rarely pull a big bull down.

We gathered ourselves back into a cohesive group and set off after the now tight and fleeing herd of buffaloes. We saw droplets of blood all along the way. There were pools of blood in the sand wherever and whenever the animals stopped to rest. When they were running they kept going into the wind. And - even when they did not get our scent - the heavily leafed bush was so thick they heard us moving through it every time we caught up with them.

We flushed those buffaloes many times without ever seeing them, or them us. And they didn't wait for an invitation to keep going.

The first time they stopped they had travelled less than a mile. They had turned to face their back trail, looking (buffalo have extremely good eyesight) and listening for signs of pursuit. After that they ran for five miles. These animals had been hunted before!

Towards midday they changed direction - moving across the wind. A mile later they changed direction again. They were heading back towards Dett - into habitat with which they were very familiar.

Determined to get the wounded animal we pushed on. Sumbe never once lost the tracks even though there was *other* buffalo spoor everywhere. The tracking, in fact, was easy. And because the buffalo were hearing us more

often than they were seeing or smelling us, maintaining silence took on a whole new meaning. Because two people made less noise than five, I instructed the three *surplus* trackers to hang back from Sumbe and me - by at least 100 yards. And I told Mbuyotsi to follow *our* spoor.

Then the wind changed direction; and it softened. The direction of the buffalo's flight changed with it. They now started to run fully with the wind. There were no flies on *these* buffaloes.

After that we flushed them more frequently; but the intervals between our contacts got shorter and shorter as the big bulls tired. They moved. They found a place in thick bush to wait and to listen along their back trail. And when they heard or smelled us coming, they ran off again.

What I didn't get properly to grips with on this hunt - because I was then ignorant of what happens during such a relentless pursuit - was the fact that as the buffaloes got more and more tired, they got more and more angry, too. But I kept up the pressure because I wanted to kill the buffalo I had wounded.

I was soon to find out just how angry a *pushed* and exhausted buffalo could be!

Then, for the first time in hours, Sumbe and I got a glimpse of their black bodies in the bush ahead of us. They were standing still, waiting, listening for sounds of our continuing pursuit. My heart beat faster. I quickly looked for a sign that would tell me which bull had been wounded. A bit of blood on a snout, maybe. A hanging sore head! Nothing! One wary old bull saw us and, with a loud *whooshh*, it turned and galloped off. The others followed.

This time they ran for a mile before we caught up with them again. They got our wind and galloped off - unseen. This performance was repeated half-a-mile further on.

I could *feel* the buffalo's fatigue. This egged me on. I *wanted* that wounded animal dead.

Besides getting tired, the big bulls were also getting agitated. That *feeling*

was in the air, too. Sensing my quarry's mood was an instinct that I was to hone to a *T* in the years ahead. It saved my life on many an occasion. My experience at the time of this hunt, however, was still very raw. I had not yet mastered the necessary telepathy. Nevertheless, a prodding sixth sense did tell me that a charge was imminent.

Then, for the first time that day, out of the thick teak scrub ahead of us, we heard oxpeckers chattering. It was a soft churring sound that carried some distance through the heavy teak. I could visualize the flock of red-billed small brown birds fossicking all over the buffaloes' bodies in search of ticks. Their calls were a dead giveaway. The birds' calls, thereafter, became the focus of our attention.

The tracks at our feet were fresh but we knew the birds were on the buffaloes. So when we could hear them, we stopped tracking and we walked directly towards the birds' chattering calls - looking carefully at each black mass that appeared in the bush ahead of us.

Following the churring and chattering calls of the oxpeckers was preferable to tracking the buffaloes' hoof prints. It gave us the added opportunity to use the wind to our best advantage - to move off the tracks into a better downwind - or crosswind - position without losing contact with our quarry.

The herd walked on tiredly ahead of us, pushing resolutely through the thick brush. They were, all the time, trying to put distance between themselves and their relentless pursuers.

They got our wind. They ran off. Half-a-mile later we again heard the oxpeckers.

Then we heard the buffaloes themselves. There was the sound of stiff brush scraping against tough hide; a grunt; the odd snapping of a dead stick underfoot; the rustle of dry leaves on the forest floor; the soft *clut* of two horns connecting.

They turned again and began walking obliquely across the wind now - back towards the heavy sinanga thickets near the village of Dett.

‘At last,’ I thought. ‘Now we will have a chance of getting close enough to find our wounded friend.’

There was a spot of fresh blood adhering to a dried leaf at our feet. Sumbe gestured to it with his eyes and a nod of his head. It confirmed that our wounded buffalo was still with the herd.

We again abandoned the tracks and walked fast towards the sounds made by the moving buffaloes. The twittering calls of the oxpeckers were now incessant.

Sumbe was two paces in front of me, walking fast and silently. He canvassed the bushes ahead with experienced eyes. I too searched ahead for sign of the buffaloes; and my ears were attuned to catch every sound.

I held my rifle in both my hands at the ready. There was a 500 grain solid bullet up the spout. The Mauser safety-catch was on half-cock. My thumb was ready to flick it fully off at a moment’s notice. I was prepared, I thought, for anything.

Suddenly everything changed. What happened next seemed to happen in very slow motion but in reality it occurred with lightning speed.

The next incident, from start to finish, took place in less than 10 seconds!

Sumbe stopped abruptly in front of me. He glanced halfway around to his right. For a brief moment he looked hard at a point that was slightly behind and to the side of my right shoulder. His eyes suddenly grew to the size of saucers. Then he turned and took off, running like a hare.

I had only half-turned, swinging my rifle barrel to the right, when a loud and guttural grunt flooded my senses. My blood turned cold. The sound seemed to come from directly under my armpit, so close to me did I feel its presence. That deep-throated and menacing bark was a sound that I came to dread. It was the sound of coming death.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the beginning of what I already knew was about to happen. Just five yards away I absorbed - rather than *saw* - a huge buffalo bull erupting from a small clump of very thick, heavily-leafed bushes. Its dark, bloodshot eyes were focussed directly on me.

It had been standing there, well hidden, unmoving and silent, awaiting our close approach. There is no doubt that it had heard us coming. There is no doubt that it had seen us and had watched our progress. This buffalo had had enough of being pushed around so it had waited for us in ambush. It was angry. VERY angry! And its intent now was to kill its pestering pursuers.

In one lurching rush, the buffalo was in a full blown charge. Spinning round to face it, I had just enough time to swing my rifle, at waist height, towards the onrushing animal. My thumb released the safety catch. When I pulled the trigger mere feet separated the rifle's muzzle from the buffalo's nose.

The rifle kicked backwards and upwards. I flung myself back - tripping over my heels - falling - as the beast's huge boss lowered to hit me.

The heavy bullet hit the animal square in the chest. It had no effect. The buffalo came on as if nothing had happened. It hooked with its left horn, the tip racing towards my left armpit. I was falling back - facing the animal - and I witnessed every terrifying second of what was taking place. My rifle was still gripped in both my hands but it was over my head - the furthest distance from my determined attacker.

The hooking horn missed, the tip passing my face mere inches away. The buffalo's polished wet nose brushed the right hand side of my body - accidentally nudging me on; and its head rose high following the fierce thrust of the upsweeping horn. I had been lucky up to that point but I was not about to get away unscathed.

In its forward rush the buffalo's galloping front legs smacked into my calves. The impact was huge and heavy, numbing and paralyzing the muscles instantly; and it knocked both my legs forwards. Because I was still falling backwards at the time, the impact spun my body in the air just before my back hit the deck. The aerial pirouette that followed brought my head and

shoulders directly under the buffalo's belly.

The buffalo continued with its charge. The momentum of its weight and speed could not be denied; and its galloping hind feet kicked me forward. One hoof impacted with my ribs, the other with the back of my head. The hit rolled my body right over 360 degrees. I was, once more, lying on my back. Bright sparkling lights were exploding in my vision.

When its head came down - still in a full blown gallop - the buffalo saw Sumbe running away mere yards away ahead of it. Changing the focus of its attack, the cantankerous old bull left me bruised and sore in the sand behind it; and it took off after Sumbe.

Had Sumbe not been in front of the buffalo at that precise moment, I am quite sure it would have turned, come back, and that it would then have gored me to death. But Sumbe *had* been there and *that* fact saved my life.

The Bushman grasped at a sapling with the intention of swinging his body fast and sharply to one side. It was an old trick the trackers used to get out from under a charging animal's attack. This time it did not work.

The buffalo's boss hit Sumbe fair and square in the middle of his back. At the same time the cleft of a cloven hoof splayed across one of his Achilles' tendons, pegging his foot to the ground. When the force of the Buffalo's strike smacked Sumbe's body forward, therefore, its hoof peeled the flesh off either side of the tracker's heel.

The Bushman was elevated and sent flying through the air, his arms and legs akimbo, ahead of the buffalo's deadly attack.

I sat up awkwardly in the sand and rammed a fresh round into the breech. Time was now of the essence. The next few moments would see Sumbe saved or killed. Snap shooting from this sitting position on the ground, I banged a bullet low down into the buffalo's ribcage - raking forwards. The big bull staggered. Its determined forward rush faltered. It had been hit sufficiently hard this time for it to ignore Sumbe's body lying sprawled and squirming on the ground right in front of it.

The big buffalo overran Sumbe and it ran on.

Lurching to my feet, and fighting the pain and the incapacities of my injured calves, I fired the last two rounds in my rifle's magazine into the retreating buffalo's anus. Those two bullets, I knew, would course forward through the entire length of the animal's body, damaging a whole host of vital organs in their passage.

Then the buffalo was gone - gone into the dense forest foliage in front of us.

I watched Sumbe sit up amongst the shrubbery of the forest floor. I felt relief. He too, seemingly, had survived the ordeal.

I sat back down on the ground - because I simply could not keep standing any longer - and I took in several deep breaths of air. The danger was over. Once again my body was shaking uncontrollably. My lower legs were aching and my ribs were sore but I was more concerned about the hoof blow I had taken to my head. There was a massive oedema developing behind my left ear. I fingered the swelling gingerly. Bright lights were still exploding in my vision and a serious headache was developing.

In the distance I heard the long, low bellow of a buffalo in extremis. It was the buffalo's swansong. Our fierce old warrior was down. One of my bullets had found its mark and the bull was gasping its last few breaths.

I reloaded the rifle's magazine with quivering hands, the cartridges drawn from the ammunition belt about my waist. Putting a round up the spout I set the rifle to safe.

I sensed that I should go and have a look at Sumbe. He had taken a heavy knock and everything did not seem right with him. He had not yet risen to his feet. But when I tried to stand up this time, my legs refused to respond.

Behind me I saw the other trackers rushing towards me.

Then the screaming started. I looked up to see Sumbe stumbling through the

bushes. He was wailing like a banshee. *That* is what caught my attention - his wild and strident keening. Something was definitely wrong.

I again tried to get to my feet but my bruised and battered calves still refused to function. I managed to stand but that was all. I tried to move over to where Sumbe was now rampaging amongst the teak forest undergrowth. The effort was beyond me. I looked desperately and helplessly at Sumbe. I tried once again to move towards him. He began reeling and stumbling around; and I knew then that something was seriously amiss.

He came lurching back towards me. His eyes were huge and strange. Continuous caterwauling issued from his mouth.

Mbuyotsi came rushing up. Sumbe, on seeing him, stumbled away again - hurriedly - screaming.

“Go catch him,” I instructed Mbuyotsi.

Mbuyotsi ran after his Bushman colleague. He first grabbed at him roughly, but missed. He was altogether not easy to catch despite his physical impairment - whatever it might be! Finally Mbuyotsi pounced on him, wrapping his arms about Sumbe’s legs in a shoddy rugby-like tackle. Having pinned him down, Mbuyotsi dragged his friend back to me, pulling him by one arm. Sumbe, all the while, was limping along and whimpering like a puppy.

Just as they got to me Sumbe broke free. This time he threw himself onto the ground, rolling over and over in the sand, and amongst the leaves and the sticks of the forest floor. And the screaming started up all over again.

It was then that I saw the massive wound in his right forearm.

I blanched and forgot all about my own injuries. They were inconsequential by comparison.

Mbuyotsi grabbed Sumbe again, this time holding him down tight in a sitting position on the ground. Ben and Rojas were now standing next to me. They

looked on in awe.

The injured tracker's dark skin was grey. When I touched him his body was icy cold. Yet he was sweating profusely. The perspiration was running from the pores in his face in continuous rivulets.

He turned his eyes to me then, and he said: "*Nkosana (Little Chief)... You have killed me. You have killed me.... Now just let me die.*" After that remark he fell over onto his back and rolled his eyes.

I knelt down next to him and lifted his hugely damaged arm by the hand. It was clear that the wound had been caused by one of my .458 Magnum bullets. It must have been the rib-cage shot. We later discovered that that bullet had exited the buffalo's body just forward of its right shoulder.

The best way to describe Sumbe's wound is to ask you, the reader, to imagine the tracker sitting at a table with his right forearm lying on the tabletop, the palm of the hand facing upwards. The bullet had come from behind the tracker, narrowly missing his body. It had entered his forearm just to the left of the right elbow joint. It had progressed through the flesh above the two bones of the forearm, exiting on the right hand side of the wrist. But the bullet had not just entered and exited. After leaving the buffalo's body it had been tumbling through the air - cart-wheeling nose-over-tail. Like a churning meat grinder, it had ripped a huge hole in the flesh of the tracker's arm. The entire set of muscles of his inner forearm had literally exploded outwards in a massive and jagged wound.

When I lifted Sumbe's arm by the hand, the only solid thing joining his elbow to his hand were the two naked bones of the forearm. There was a thick blue and pulsing artery running between the elbow and the wrist. All the flesh that had once surrounded the bones, and all the other blood vessels, had been blown away. The flesh hung in a heavy open slab of meat, the skin facing away from the body, the raw muscle facing towards it. I could have put my fist between the bones of the arm and the muscles hanging beneath them. Despite the massive extent of the wound - strangely - there was very little bleeding

Ben and Rojas held Sumbe's arm firmly in their hands to enable me to remove what I could of the sand, leaves and twigs that were adhering to the open flesh. I instructed Rojas to remove his shirt which I tore into bandage strips. I then began the task of trying to re-assemble the torn muscles around the naked bones; binding them together with the strips of shirt bandage. When this was done we lifted Sumbe to his feet.

Mbuyotsi ran eight miles back to Main Camp to get help. Ben and Rojas supported Sumbe as they frog-marched him the two miles to Livingi Pan, which was on the jeep track that ran between Main Camp and Dett. Surprisingly, on this forced march, it was the torn flesh of his Achilles tendon that caused him the most pain.

I limped along behind. My battered calf muscles loosening up along the way!

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Senior Ranger Harry Cante, accompanied by Mbuyotsi, picked us up and transported us back to the government Land Rover which was still parked on the railway fireguard. Sumbe, Mbuyotsi and I then transferred to my Land Rover, and Harry drove back to Main Camp with the other two trackers.

In Dett, the Rhodesia Railway's nursing sister gave Sumbe his first real medical attention. Other than to more professionally clean his wound and give him morphine to kill the pain, however, there was very little she could do. She phoned the Hwange colliery hospital and informed them that a seriously gun-shot patient would soon be arriving. She described Sumbe's injuries; and the surgeon at Hwange prepared an operating theatre.

By then the pain and paralysis in my legs had subsided enough for me to drive. So, with Mbuyotsi standing on the back decking, I drove Sumbe to Hwange colliery hospital 80 miles away, where he underwent major surgery.

Sumbe not only survived the events of that day, but he emerged a stronger person. He was given an 85 per cent lump-sum disability pension. In fact,

after the wounds had all healed, I gauged that he had lost only 15 per cent of his arm's function.

In later years Sumbe worked for me extensively, hunting many more buffaloes and elephants with me, and tracking several of the black rhinos that I captured. Not once did he allow the fact that I had been responsible for his injury, interfere with our relationship.

Whilst he was still in hospital a policeman took a statement from him. This was normal procedure following a shooting accident. Sumbe refused to condemn me. Later, the policeman told me that all Sumbe was prepared to say was: *"It was a friendly bullet that went wrong. Had Mahohboh not shot the buffalo when he did, it would have killed me."*

Mahohboh is my Bushman (or native) honour name - bestowed on me, strangely enough, by Sumbe. Literally translated it infers: The one who heaps (elephants). Volker Grellmann, one of Namibia's leading Professional Hunters, construed this to mean: The Great Slayer of Elephants.

Mahohboh was the name by which I became known throughout Rhodesia over the next 25 years. I carried it with great pride.

The buffalo we killed that morning was not the one I had wounded. That one we never found.

My most memorable lion hunt.

A lion can hide behind one blade of grass. A bit of an exaggeration? Perhaps! But it is damn nearly true. Lions do not need much cover to disappear right before your eyes. This fact was driven home to me, once again, very early one morning in 1962.

The previous day I had been called out to deal with two lions that had been killing cattle at the bottom end of the Dett Vlei on Dahlia Ranch. The property belonged to Bert Riding and Harold Bloomberg, the owners of the Gwaai River Hotel.

The kill site was only 15 miles from Main Camp. The report came in after lunch and I was guided onto the kill by one of the native ranch hands, mid-afternoon. Sumbe, Mbuyotsi and I hurriedly set Main Camp's five big gin traps - large Canadian bear traps - around the half-eaten carcass of a beef cow the lions had killed and half-eaten the night before. We left the kill site just on dusk.

I had a feeling I had hunted these two lions before - recently - unsuccessfully (obviously) - once on Dahlia Ranch and once on what we called *The Hillbilly Farm* (Die Kopje-Willem Plaas). The Hillbilly Farm belonged to Jim Chatham. It was located next door to the Gwaai River Hotel. So I felt reasonably sure the cattle-killers, on both properties, were the same lions.

On both occasions the lions never came back to their kill. They knew the ropes! But, if they *were* the same lions, maybe - just maybe - they would return to *this* one. You always had to assume that stock-killing lions will come back. If you didn't set traps with this expectation, why set them at all? So I went about my task of setting the traps with all the guile that I could muster.

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Once upon a time, when I set traps for lions or leopards, I felt that I was cheating. I believed that no matter what they had done, the majestic big cats

deserved less ignoble deaths.

But when I experienced the anguish of Jim Chatham over the loss of 101 head of Brahman-cross beef cattle over an eighteen month period - to ONE lion - my one time guilty conscience took a back seat. After the Jim Chatham experience I became inured to setting gin traps for stock-killers and my sport hunting ethics never again intervened with my moral and professional obligations.

When that lion had first started killing his cattle, Jim Chatham decided that he wanted to *shoot himself a lion* – although he had never, at that stage, shot one before. So he set out, in his own inimitable fashion, to hunt the lion down.

He had failed to kill it in the conventional hunting manner; failed to trap it; failed to hunt it down with dogs; and failed to poison it. In effect, he taught that lion how to evade every trick in the book. In the end, the lion refused to come back even to its own kills. It simply killed another beast when it was hungry; and it moved from one cattle ranch to another throughout the Gwaai and Shangani River valleys.

Jim had called us in to help him only after he had taught the lion everything. I tried to kill it but never got anywhere near it. Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke had the same experience. Jim Chatham, therefore, paid a very high price for his self indulgence. A pod of well-laid gin traps set around the lion's very first kill would have prevented that terrible cost.

Jim Chatham also paid a very high price for another foolish act. In the winter of 1963, he shot that lion - at least we believe it was the same lion - in the face with a shotgun. One evening he was out on his farm shooting birds - guinea fowl and francolins (pheasants). When, walking back home, he unexpectedly bumped into the big cat at close range. He had only light bird-shot shells in his double-barreled shotgun. Nevertheless, he let it have both barrels in the face; and the shot was not nearly heavy enough to kill the lion.

A 12 ga. shotgun is a good weapon for lions - especially for close-up hunting in very thick bush - when it is loaded with the right kind of shot. SSG and AAA loads are admirably suited to killing lions but

using anything smaller is asking for trouble!

After its shooting, the lion mauled Jimmy Chatham very badly and Jim spent several weeks in hospital recovering from his wounds.

One of our new young game rangers at that time (Tony Boyce or was it Roland Venables???) killed the lion the next day, by which time it had become totally blind. Both its eyes had been punctured by tiny lead pellets, and it had taken the rest of the night to render the lion sightless.

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All these experiences caused me to drop any and all pretences about our use of gin traps for the control of stock-killing lions, leopards and hyenas. The fact that I came from farming stock myself (my father was a farmer) probably helped me to empathize most greatly on the side of the farmer-victims.

I, therefore, altogether stopped trying to justify our use of these vicious-looking leg-hold traps. My attitude hardened. When I was called out to kill a stock-killing predator I did not venture forth to indulge myself in recreational sport. I had a job of work to do - which was to kill the stock-killers as quickly as possible. And if that required that I use gin traps or poisons that is what I used.

I did not concern myself with any emotional reaction that came from ignorant (although possibly well-meaning) members of the public. They have no knowledge about, or accountability for, stock-killing predator control work. I did what I was employed to do, and I provided the complainant farmer with as much of my specialised assistance - and time - as I was able to extend to him.

If the two lions I hunted that day were the same as those I had tried to trap before, to my knowledge they had accounted for something like ten head of beef cattle in the last month or six weeks; and I suspect they had killed a whole lot more in the adjacent TTLs. It was time their reign of terror came to an end.

The kill site was only half-an-hour's drive from Main Camp, so - after setting the traps - the trackers and I spent the night in our own homes.

Dawn the next morning found me travelling down the Dett Vlei dirt road towards Dahlia Ranch. My tracker, Ben, and Sumbe accompanied me.

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Sumbe, at that stage, was back in business. The huge scar on his right arm was horrendous and his use of that arm was greatly impaired. But he could still track! He kept the wound covered with a handkerchief, the two bottom corners of which were tied together around his wrist. The two upper corners he tied around his arm above the elbow. Thus shrouded, the scar was covered from public view - but the very fact of the handkerchief drew attention to it. And everyone wanted a peek at the massive and still raw-looking wound. It wasn't every day that you met someone who had had half his arm blown to pieces by an elephant gun's heavy bullet!

If nothing else, Sumbe must be credited with a high degree of entrepreneurship. When he attended weekend beer-drinks - which occurred every Saturday night in the Main Camp native compound - he would give people a brief look at his wound *provided* they bought him a jug of beer. His weekend binges, therefore, cost him very little.

As for the money he obtained from government, for his once off injured-on-duty disability grant.... Well.... He exhausted all that within six months - on wine women and song. That made Sumbe no different from any of the other natives and Bushman trackers who lived in the Main Camp native-staff compound at that time. Every one of them would have done exactly the same thing. They lived for today and left tomorrow to look after itself.

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I had, at that stage, bought myself a reconditioned Series-One short-wheelbase Land Rover from a mechanic friend of mine who lived in Livingstone - the Northern Rhodesian town across the Zambezi River from Victoria Falls. The four cylinder side-valve engine had been completely

overhauled, as had it's every other mechanical function. It had been re-sprayed (dark green) and the khaki canvas roof was new. It was, effectively, a brand new vehicle and a bargain at £150 (Rhodesian) - which was then the equivalent of £150 sterling. How times and prices have changed!

On the morning of the hunt I used my own newly acquired Land Rover, for the first time, on official duty. Sumbe sat in the passenger seat across from me. Ben was in the back with his head looking forward between our two seats. Mbuyotsi had not come with us that morning.

The light was pale as the day was still waiting for the sun to rise. There was a light smoky mist in the air (guti) that morning, resultant from some drizzle during the night; and the road wound its way along the edge of the vleis and disappeared into the watery haze.

We were on our way to the traps.

Ben, who was staring far ahead into the murky fog, suddenly pointed to the front. "*Nanso...*" he exclaimed. *Look there.*

I looked to where he was pointing and saw two dark brown animal shapes wandering towards us. They were still far away on the road having just emerged from the mist bank. They were walking side by side, each animal having commandeered one of the two wheel tracks on the road. I took my foot off the accelerator.

"*What are they?*" I asked him.

"*Anghaazeh....*" He replied. *I don't know.*

"*What do you make of them?*" I asked Sumbe at my side. I made a gesture - as the Bushmen always did - by pushing my face and nose towards the objectives of my inquiry. I drew the vehicle to a stop.

The animals on the road stopped, too. They stood and looked at us - as we were looking at them. They were a good half-a-mile away, still obscured and shrouded by the sombre gloom.

All three of us peered through the windscreen into the murky light. I worked the rubber wipers to clear the glass of its tiny mist droplets.

Far away ahead of us, in the colourless half-light of the early dawn, we could all now more clearly see two large animals standing still on the bare gravel road.

“Donkeys,” Sumbe announced positively.

Donkeys? We were outside the game reserve in the Sekumi Forest Reserve, and not far from the cattle fence across the vlei that marked the beginning of Dahlia ranch. So maybe Sumbe was right. They could have been donkeys - donkeys that had jumped the cattle-grid on the dirt road.

I put the vehicle into gear and slowly advanced down the road. The two animals continued to stand still, observing and evaluating our progress towards them.

As we drew closer they both lifted their heads higher and stared at the slowly approaching vehicle. They were clearly becoming apprehensive.

Then I recognised them for what they were. I was looking at two very large male lions.

I stopped the Land Rover in the middle of the road. Ben handed me my binoculars which he had extracted from behind my seat. I examined the big cats minutely. They were lions all right. And they were huge. They both sported long and heavy black manes. They were beauty personified!

“Isiliwana!” Sumbe said from the seat beside me, changing his mind. *They are lions!*

“Isiliwana,” I confirmed, nodding my head. They were, indeed, lions.

They were still 300 yards away; and they stood for a long time, without any apparent fear - quiet - unmoving - looking intently at the now stationary Land

Rover. I looked back at them through the binoculars.

Ben slid my .458 Magnum out of its canvas case.

“Are these our lions?” I enquired of Sumbe. *“Are these the lions we laid traps for yesterday afternoon?”*

“Yes,” Sumbe replied immediately. *“They are walking up the road from Dahlia Ranch,”* he reasoned. *“Their kill is now only two miles away further down the road. It must be them.”*

I agreed.

“Ben?”

Ben nodded. He knew where Dahlia Ranch was. He agreed with Sumbe.

The road ran along the edge of the vlei which was on our right hand side. On our left the ground rose sharply until it reached the edge of the heavy teak forest. There was a deep, wide and heavily grassed storm drain on both sides of the road. Fifty yards beyond the storm drain, on the left hand side of the road, the teak forest started. Between the road and the gusu (forest) there was sparse and wiry grassland, with light msusu (*Terminalia*) scrub.

One of the lions left the road and ambled off into the bush on the left hand side. After a short pause, the other one followed. Their movements were graceful and leisurely. They were in no hurry and I quickly lost sight of them both.

I quietly opened the Land Rover door and stepped out onto the gravel road. I strapped my cartridge belt about my waist and adjusted its position over my hips. If you expect to carry a heavy cartridge belt for a long time through the bush, you are well advised to make sure the belt is comfortable when you start the day. If you don't, you will quickly experience its sharp edges cutting into your flesh over the hip-bones.

I took my rifle from Ben and checked the magazine. It contained three

rounds. It was full. I took a fourth cartridge from my belt and, with my left thumb, held it securely on the surface of the round that was on the top of the open magazine. I closed the bolt softly and gently, and let it push the fourth round into the chamber. The weapon was now *fully* loaded - with *four* rounds! I put it on safe.

"You guys stay here," I instructed the trackers. *"I'm going to walk down the road. Maybe I will see the lions lying up in the scrub."*

I set off alone, walking quietly and purposefully down the road.

The drizzle must have been heavy during the night because the sandy road surface was more than just damp. So when I came to the spot where the lions had been standing on the road, their huge pugmarks were very clear to see. There I stopped and turned to face the forest edge.

The lions had moved off at right angles to the road. For a short distance their spoor was obvious even after it left the gravel. Where they had traversed the storm drain, their legs had brushed the glistening dewdrops off the grass tops all along the route they had travelled. Their legs, therefore, had drawn a dull line through the mat of otherwise sparkling droplets.

I could see where they had climbed the open cut beyond the drain, moving upwards towards the forest edge. Halfway up the slope, however, their aerial spoor petered out. At least, from the road, I could not follow it any more.

I stood still and carefully looked up the slope towards the forest. My rifle was at the ready. The safety catch was off. I just knew the lions were lying in the brush -somewhere close - within sight of where I was standing. They were watching my every move. I could *feel* them watching me but I could see nothing. Patience was now my best companion.

The ground sloped fairly sharply as it rose from the storm drain towards the teak. There was the odd msusu sapling growing amidst the spindly grass. There were also short, coppicing msusu bushes sprouting from underground root-stock that had survived the last scorching veld fire. The sparseness of the grass, and the otherwise openness of the slope, made me believe the lions

had travelled right to the edge of the forest - for I could see them nowhere in between.

The first of the big teak trees, and the much thicker teak scrub beneath them, began abruptly in a long line parallel to the road. It was a solid wall of heavy greenery. I imagined the lions had entered this understory thicket. It was the only real cover anywhere about. I could see them, in my mind's eye, selecting a place of concealment in which to lie down - hidden from the road; and I visualized them now looking down at me from their vantage point as I stood looking up towards the forest.

My eyes canvassed the open grassland in front of me time-and-time again. Nothing! Continuously, they penetrated every nook and cranny on the forest edge. Nothing! I repeated these searches again and again and again. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! I left no stone unturned. I knew - I could *feel* it - that somewhere in front of me, and not too far away, the lions were watching my every move.

I doubted the lions had walked deeper into the forest. The light rain had left the vegetation there dripping and big cats don't like getting their coats wet. When conditions are damp, lions and leopards use roads and paths in preference to walking through heavy wet grass or brush.

I tried to put myself in the lion's shoes - which is always a good way to unravel a conundrum when you know a little bit about your quarry's habits. What would I have done if I was one of them? I surmised that I would have gone to ground within sight of the road, and that I would have watched and waited until the puny white man had walked past. And, when he was out of sight, I would return to the road and continue my interrupted journey.

The lions had been going *somewhere* and they knew exactly where they wanted to go. And, no matter what, they would reach their intended destination whatever the obstacles on their journey.

If I was correct, they would be lying somewhere right in front of me. And, if that was true, if I was patient, their curiosity would eventually get the better of them. In time, one of them would move - to look at me more directly.

Alternatively, their nerves would break. If that happened they would get up suddenly and, with heavy grunts, they would lope off deeper into the forest - whether it be wet or dry. I was ready for either eventually.

And if they ran off deep into the forest, the trackers and I would follow them - for the rest of the day if necessary. Tracking them over damp Kalahari sand would be a cinch. And we would force a confrontation - some time - some place - later in the day.

So I stood calmly, quietly and alone - absolutely immobile - on the road. The only parts of me that moved were my eyes. They repeatedly roamed over every tuft of grass and every bushy coppice that I had looked at many times before - between me and the forest edge. They probed - ever more deeply - the forest edge itself. Nothing drew my attention.

One minute turned into two. Then three! Then four! And all the while I felt confident that I was doing the right thing. The lions were there. I knew it. And I believed implicitly that, if I stood my ground, they would be the first to move.

I didn't move about. I didn't shuffle my feet. I didn't fidget with my fingers on the rifle. I stood absolutely still - and that tactic alone, I believed, would draw the lions' attention. They would begin to wonder just what I was doing standing so still - and for so long - on the gravel road.

Then I saw movement - not thirty yards away - right in front of me. And, almost surreptitiously, right out in the open, a huge lion's head, fringed with its dark mane, rose up out of the sparse and wiry grass.

I could not believe my eyes. How the hell had that huge animal hidden itself away in such flimsy cover?

The lion appeared to be not in the least bit alarmed. It peered down the slope at me with obvious curiosity. It gave no sign of wanting to get up and run away. So I took my time. I looked around to see if I could find the second lion. Nothing!

Another minute passed. One lion was better than none!

I raised my rifle ever so slowly to my shoulder. This caused the lion to look at me with greater intensity. I placed the bead across the bridge of its nose and squeezed the trigger. The recoil kicked viciously against my shoulder and the impact of the bullet punched the big cat's head backwards and upwards.

That is all I recall about killing the first lion.

What happened next took less than 10 seconds - from start to finish.

The instant the rifle boomed the second lion erupted from the side of the first one. And it came at me in an immediate, full blown charge. I did not even see the first lion falling onto its side although, instinctively, I knew that I had killed it.

I was shocked by the unexpected, sudden and terrifying change of circumstances. My mind was now totally focussed on the unnerving charge of the second lion. It came racing down the slope like an express train, *chuntering* to itself all the while, loudly and gutturally. Its bright yellow eyes bore into mine, unwavering, venomous.

The hair on the back of my neck and along my arms erected instantly. My mouth dried up in a flash and the nerves in my crotch cramped and writhed quite out of control.

The lion's intention was obvious. The menace in its eyes was enough to put the fear of God into the devil himself. My body was shaking like a leaf.

I ejected the spent shell and jacked another round into the chamber. That action took just a fraction of a second. All over my nerves were tingling. My face blanched. Instant coldness swept across my brow and cheeks.

By the time I had the butt of my rifle back on my shoulder the lion was at the bottom of the storm drain. Its eyes were, all the while, focussed on me with

an electrifying tenacity.

The lion was now far too close for comfort but I dared not panic. I did not have time to panic. I did not have time to even *think* of panicking. Everything was happening so very fast. The tables had been turned far too precipitously for any comprehension of the very real danger I was in, to really sink home.

The shock of the unexpected and sudden attack was just too great a reality for my body to ignore. The animal in me began to function. All the natural and intrinsic mechanisms that prepare one for *fight or flight* burst into operation. Instinctively my hunter training kicked in. I clutched at my loose and wavering nerves, pulling them forcibly together. Fear I had aplenty. Yes! But now, at the eleventh hour - when it was most important to do so - I had it under control.

My soul, during those few fleeting and very dangerous moments, was floating like a wreath of smoke above my head. The thought flashed through my mind: *'This isn't really happening to me!'*

The lion leapt upwards out of the gutter, launching itself directly at me. The closer it got the bigger it became. It was huge. Its golden yellow eyes never left mine. If it got hold of me I hadn't a snowball's hope in Hades of surviving the mauling that would follow. I had an overwhelming desire to run... and to run.... and to run. But running would do me no good. At that moment death stared me in the face. I knew it. And I knew, too, that I had no option. I simply had to stand my ground and endure this terrifying experience.

It was a difficult target, for the charging lion was careering towards me at an incredible speed, and in giant leaps and bounds. I tried aiming for the brain but instantly abandoned that idea. There was just too much vertical movement - up and down - of the animal's head. But I had to do *something* - and quickly. Every split second the lion was getting closer.

I dropped my aim. The lion was no more than five yards from me - coming as fast as it could move - when my bullet hit it square in the chest.

The monster cat - in a twinkle - faltered. But it came on. And it raced across the intervening space in a flashing instant.

I scrambled to one side, feverishly working the rifle's bolt. At the same time I scuttled backwards - trying to get out of the lion's direct line of attack.

When it reached the road the lion tripped - unexpectedly and suddenly - and it fell to the ground, onto its nose, right at my feet. It rose groggily, staggering forwards, still attacking. Its head, snarling and snapping at my midriff, slipped narrowly past my stomach as I twisted away. Its teeth had missed their mark but its lurching shoulder smashed against my hip, sending me flying. Somehow I stayed on my feet. And I hung onto my rifle for grim death, trying desperately to remain facing my foe. At such close quarters I could have been clawed to the ground and mauled at any moment.

The animal was hard hit but it was not going down and the last thing I wanted was to turn my back on a wounded lion. Anything could still happen.

My nerves were on edge - vibrant and alive - but I was now much more under control than I had been just one instant before. My shot into the lion's chest had turned the tables - somewhat - in my favour.

Suddenly, the lion began chasing its tail like a demented dog. Round and round it ran.... growling.... growling.... growling..... The deep resonance of its hoarse anger seemed to come from the very depths of its belly. I was whip-lashed by its tail several times before I was able to shuffle even further backwards.

Regaining my balance I was able, at last, to open the breech again and I rammed the bolt home. With another live round up the spout my confidence returned. But the story was not over yet. So fast and so violent were the lion's fast, contorted and twirling movements, I was unable to place an accurate shot into a vital organ. And I was not going to waste the round I had in the rifle's chamber by firing blindly into that wildly spinning target. I had no wish to be now seriously attacked by the lion with an empty rifle in my hands. And I was, all the time, very conscious of the fact that I was within

one swiping reach of the lion's paw!

All this happened in the blink of an eye!

Q. Why did I not run backwards away from the lion sooner?

*A. **There was no time!***

Q. Why did I not reload my rifle quicker after shooting the lion in the chest?

*A. **I was off balance; I was trying to evade the lion's whirligig movements right at my feet; and there was no time.***

So, when I say all this happened in the blink of an eye, I am not joking. Everything that was happening was happening far too fast for me to do anything but react - and to react instinctively - to each and every circumstance as it unfolded.

With another live round in the rifle's chamber, I stood my ground, at the ready, and I waited for the lion's gyrations to stop. And all the while the big cat was within poking distance of the rifle's muzzle. All it would take to end this terrifying charade was one well-placed bullet in its brain. But there was still more to come.

I was standing less than six feet from the spinning lion. My rifle muzzle followed every twist and turn of its bewildering merry-go-round. I waited patiently for the expected moment when the animal would collapse in a heap onto the ground. And the more I watched it the more I marvelled at the lion's great size.

The height of its shoulder was well above my navel. Its tail at the root was thicker than my arm. My gathering senses noted other things, too. There was a huge and jagged tear midway down the animal's back. It was my bullet's exit wound. That fact, will give you some idea of the angle at which the lion launched its final bounding attack out of the storm drain.

Whilst all this was going on, I noticed a new vacancy in the lion's eyes. It was no longer concerned about me. Nor did it seem interested in anything

else either. It was dying! This realization boosted my confidence. But it wasn't dead yet.

Suddenly it reared upon its back feet, right in front of me. Its huge paws were outstretched on either side of its shoulders, each splayed toe baring its naked claw. It ignored me completely. At that stage I don't think it even registered that I was standing so close alongside it. It reached over its shoulder with its head, gnashing its teeth and roaring loudly, as it tried to bite the pain at the site where my bullet had come out of its middle back.

I cannot tell you how big that lion was as it stood, towering, more than three feet above my head. Its huge forearms were thicker than my thighs. Each outstretched paw was bigger in width than both of my hands put together, splayed out thumb-tip to thumb-tip. Its torso was thicker than that of a large donkey.

And it's now very deep and full roars reverberated to the very core of my wildly beating heart.

I shot the lion full in the chest at point blank range. The rifle's muzzle was no more than six feet away. The heavy bullet punched the great beast backwards; and it fell onto its side in the middle of the road.

Not yet beaten, the lion bounced to its feet and raced off diagonally across my front, passing me by within touching distance. It charged back through the storm drain and headed for the forest edge.

I had one last chance to kill the beast before it disappeared into the gusu. I had one round left in the magazine!

The bullet caught the lion behind the left shoulder. It passed through its lungs before smashing the bones of its right shoulder beyond. The lion collapsed instantly but it was still not dead. It lay writhing and moaning amidst the short wiry grass that had hidden it so effectively just ten short seconds before.

I pulled a single cartridge from my belt and fed it quietly into the magazine.

Time was now on my side. The lion was going nowhere. I shot it through the brain the next time its head reared drunkenly above the grass.

And that last shot brought to an end the most memorable lion hunt of my entire career.

It had to happen sometime.... a black rhino knocks me down.

During the dry season months of 1964 - the first year of my participation in the Sizemba black rhino capture operations in the middle Zambezi Valley - I had several dangerous close-encounters with black rhinos.

That year, Rupert Fothergill (of Operation Noah fame) and I, were catching black rhinos in the Sizemba jesse, on the shores of Lake Kariba.

Jesse - pronounced jess - is the native name for the heavy and extensive Combretum elaeagnoides thickets of the middle and lower Zambezi River valleys.

Jesse is similar, but very different in composition, to the sinanga thickets of Hwange's teak forests. The main difference was that there were no thorns in the jesse.

We were removing the black rhinos from Sizemba to make way for its colonization by some of the hordes of Batonga tribes-people who had been displaced by the rising waters of Lake Kariba. The lake had filled to capacity for the first time the year before - in 1963 - and 14 000 of the lake basin's 57 000 Batonga refugees, had settled in the 5 000 square mile Binga district.

The Batonga, however, shared the district with hundreds of thousands of game animals that had also been displaced by the new lake. And both the wild animal refugees, and the human refugees, were at that time, all struggling to arrange for themselves new places to live in the hinterland away from the lake shore.

For five years after the formation of the lake (1963 - 1968), the conflict between the Batonga people and the wild animals of the Binga district was immense. And, at the beginning of 1964, I was posted to Binga to resolve such matters when their world's collided.

Catching the black rhinos was just one facet of my complex responsibilities at Binga. We moved them to Hwange National Park - over 300 miles away to the southwest -where we released them back into the wild. At that time, there were no black rhinos in Hwange. The last one had been shot by a white lady rancher there in 1934.

At that time, we were using - to catch black rhinos - primitive Cap-Chur dart-guns that had been designed to catch stray dogs in the inner cities of North America. These weapons used compressed CO₂ as the means to propel the darts. The darts we were using to catch the rhinos in those days, however, were 12 cc_s in volume-capacity - and they were very heavy compared to the 1 cc darts that were used to catch dogs. The effective range of these weapons was, therefore, *always* less than 15 yards. During the dry seasons of 1964 and 1965 - when we captured and moved 38 Sizemba black rhinos into Hwange - my average darting range was between 6 and 13 yards. Very few were over 10 yards.

Some of my best; most exciting; most dangerous; and most unbelievable big game hunting adventures stem from the black rhino capture operations that I was involved with between 1964 and 1970. After Rupert Fothergill was badly gored in 1965 and was retired from active game capture - because, at that time, I was the only person in the country who had any experience with dart guns and catching rhinos - I led the department's black rhino capture operations until 1970. During those incredible few years, I captured and moved a total of 140 of these dangerous and cantankerous animals to restock several of our national parks. In the process, three of my colleagues were badly injured; and I myself missed being gored by half-a-hair's breadth many times.

This is one of those stories.

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My first *really* close shave with a black rhino happened about an hour after sunrise one morning. The sun was bright and we were basking in the warmth of its early rays as we canvassed the ground along the edge of a dense jesse

looking for fresh rhino spoor.

The jesse at Sizemba occurred in pockets; some small, some very large. Some blocks were a mile square. In between were mopani woodlands and/or broken gravelly hills on which grew a variety of scrubby and edible plants. Small river courses - which only flowed only during the rains - meandered throughout the habitat.

My Bushman tracker, Ben - who had by then become a permanent feature in my life - together with our Batonka guide, Siamweri, and a casual Batonka josak (water bag) carrier, were with me. We had been out since before the dawn listening for feeding rhinos.

Black rhinos are principally nocturnal animals, spending the greater part of the night out in open habitats, feeding. They eat the green sticks of acacia and many other palatable species of woody plants. They crunch the entire finger-thick branches that they bite off; and they swallow it all - leaves, bark and crushed wood-chips. They spend the day - between 8 o'clock and 4 o'clock - sleeping soundly in the densest of dense thickets. This is why thicket habitat is so vitally important to them.

We had discovered that rhinos, when undisturbed, remain for an hour or two out in the open - feeding - after the dawn. You could hear them a long way off in the hush of the still, cool, morning air... *crrrrump... crrrrump.... crrrrump-ing....* as they chewed their sticks. They went into the thickets at about 7 o'clock. That gave us from dawn until about 7 o'clock, therefore, to find them still feeding out in the open.

Once they were inside the thicket, darting them became problematical and very dangerous. It was much better, much easier, and much safer to dart them when they were out in the open before they ventured back into the thickets. The problem was to find them out in the open.

We had heard no feeding rhinos that morning, so we started to look for their fresh spoor instead. Our next option was to follow the tracks of a rhino into the jesse and to dart it, if we could, whilst it was asleep. The problem with

this course of action was that, inside the thicket, not only was the bush very thick - which made getting a clear shot very difficult - there was also a heavy carpet of dry leaves on the ground. So it was impossible to walk quietly, and the noise we made normally alerted the rhino to our presence.

That morning, our tracking adventure started with us walking along in relatively open mopani woodland with our noses to the ground, looking for spoor. We were 50 yards out from the edge of a jesse that was growing on the crest of a shallow slope on our left hand side.

Unexpectedly, a large pregnant rhino cow emerged from the thicket and made its way into the open woodland. It began walking obliquely towards the dry streambed behind us, moving diagonally away from the jesse. That meant it would cut our own very fresh spoor - behind us - within the next 100 yards. We had walked along the dry stream bed only minutes before.

I quickly checked the breeze with my ash bag. The cow was moving directly into the wind. That meant, if I tagged on behind, it would not detect me.

I left my tracking team and hurried after the rhino - loading the dart into the chamber of the Cap-Chur gun as I moved along. I felt sure it would stop to sniff at the ground the moment it came upon our tracks. That is what rhinos do when they find a strange fresh smell. I had it in my mind that, when *that* happened, I would be within darting range (less than 15 yards away) behind it.

With the wind in my favour I felt confident that I could get *in* a good dart. My mind was totally occupied with the idea that I *must* get myself within darting range before the rhino stopped to sniff at our scent; and I was absolutely certain that it *would* stop.

Very soon I was loping along behind the rhino on an elephant path that it had chosen to follow. The path made it much easier for me to quickly close the gap behind the walking rhino. Indeed, I was catching up to it very fast when the unexpected happened.

They say you should always be prepared for the unexpected! I wasn't prepared for *this* surprise! When it happened I was just 20 yards behind my

target.

The rhino had been walking steadily along the clean elephant path, so my new tracks were directly on top of its spoor. My progress had been very quiet. And I was *sooo* close - *almost* within darting range. Within seconds I would have closed the gap and placed my dart into its buttocks.

The path in front me flowed gently down the slope towards the stream bed and I knew the rhino was about to come across our scent. So it was moments away from its anticipated stop. Therefore, as I turned a sharp corner in the path, I prepared myself to increase the tempo of my hurried stalk.

At that stage, both the rhino and I were in very open mopani woodland. There were trees and saplings everywhere - nothing big or thick - and there was nothing that was easy to climb. When darting black rhinos it is always a good thing to have an easily climbable tree nearby, just in case the animal charges you.

Very slightly behind me - on the outside of the bend in the path - there was clump of very dense, multi-stemmed dark green shrubbery. It was about ten feet across and three feet high. The plant was of the species *Boscia matabelensis* - a common evergreen plant in the mopani woodlands of the Zambezi valley.

Just as I turned the bend in the path, the rhino reached the streambed and came across our scent on the ground.

It was still outside darting range, so I stopped dead and watched it carefully. What was it going to do? If I had at that time, carried on walking, the rhino - then standing still - would have heard my every footstep! I still felt, however, I had a good chance to catch up with it, if it carried on along the elephant path beyond the stream. But it didn't. Not hesitating for a moment, it spun round and ran hell-bent-for-leather back up the elephant path straight towards me. It was running on its back trail to return into the safety of the thicket it had just left.

I turned and also ran back along the path - and immediately saw the *Boscia*

bush directly to my right front. I dived onto the ground next to it and scrambled round behind its edge. I still had the loaded Cap-Chur gun in my hands. The thick green leaves of the bush would hide me completely from the rhino's view when it reached the bend in the path.

The big cow was closing the gap very quickly and was now well within darting range, but the only target I had to shoot at was its advancing head and horns. I waited and I watched, fully expecting it to turn the corner and run back up the path it had so recently walked down.

I was excited. I had a feeling in my bones that I was going to dart this rhino! All I had to do was to let it turn the corner and run away from me up the path. It would then not be difficult to place a dart into its buttocks from behind. It would be well within darting range for several long moments. And I had every expectation that it *would* turn the corner.

It didn't turn the corner!

When it reached the bend in the path, the rhino picked up the scent of my very fresh spoor on the ground and it flew into an immediate panic. Erupting into a bolting gallop, the rhino dropped its head and, with its front horn sweeping the ground in front of it, it raced on directly towards me.

With lots of *pfusss... pfusss... pfusss...* blustering, it ploughed right through the Boscia and, before I knew it, the rhino was looming right on top of me. I am quite sure, when it first hit the Boscia it had not seen me! I am convinced that it was just running away from the very fresh human scent on the path - racing away in a dead straight line as fast as its legs would carry it. I just happened to be located right in its way.

On one knee, I *stood my ground*. Raising my body - getting ready to fire my dart - my shoulders lifted above the greenery. At that point the rhino *did* see me. For a brief instant its movement stalled. It flung its head up high - in alarm and surprise - and it glared down at me with both eyes bracketing its long front horn. In that moment my world stood still.

The end of my Cap-Chur gun barrel was just in front of and under the rhino's

chin. I pulled the trigger and the dart ploughed instantly into the animal's chest. The rhino then dropped its head and came at me full tilt.

We were now within touching distance.

I dropped the Cap-Chur gun, kicked my body backwards and deflected to my left hand side. This took me away from that long front horn (so I was falling in front of the rhino to *its* right front). As I was falling, I twisted my body round so that I would land on my hands and knees. It was my intention to then roll off further to the right, the instant I touched the ground.

The ground came up to meet me.

The rhino was now directly behind me and it was out of my forward vision. I had a feeling I had succeeded in avoiding the main thrust of its horns - but I didn't know what to expect next.

Even before my hands touched the ground, the rhino hit me - with a sideways swipe of its gigantic head. I thought the sky had fallen down on top of me.

The heavy bones of its face slammed into my outer thigh between my left knee and hip. The smack further connected with the side of my left buttock and it raked into the small of my back. Finally, in that same swipe, the front horn delivered a sideways glancing blow that ran right up my left dorsal muscle and the back of my left ribcage.

I felt my body arching backwards - involuntarily - as an archer bends his long bow across his knee. Except that my body was bent across the side of the rhino's head and horns.

The enormous power of the strike dashed my body fiercely to one side. I hit the ground heavily, the momentum rolling me over onto my back. There I lay, still - stunned - trying to catch my breath. The wind had been knocked right out of my lungs. My mind was awlirl without a conscious thought or plan of action. My brain was totally blank. The seriousness of my predicament was just too great for me to absorb. I was, for several long moments, so detached from reality that I did not fully comprehend what was

actually happening.

I was briefly conscious of the rhino's front, and then back, legs passing close by my face. Then it was gone.

I heard the heavy beat of pounding hooves... and a lot of *pfusss...* *pfusss...pfusssing...* sounds as the rhino galloped off. My breath suddenly came back - with sharp pains biting at me deep in my chest. Inside my soul, I was beginning to understand that I was not going to be gored to death. The rhino had run away. I was not going to die... *not that day anyway.*

Ben and Siamweri appeared out of nowhere. They were kneeling by my side, asking me solicitous questions. They were helping me to sit up. I had the josak thrust into my face. *It appeared it was obligatory that I have a drink.* The poor trackers didn't know what the hell to do!

In fact, I needed that drink - long and deep. Immediately my head began to clear and the ache of many deeply bruised muscles started to make their presence felt.

I had had no idea what it would be like to suffer such a blow from a black rhino. I hadn't really given it much thought. Mostly I was fearful of being gored - of having that long front horn rammed into my gut. The possibility of that happening lurked in my mind every day; when I was tracking; at night when sitting around the campfire chatting with Rupert; and when I went to bed.

Although the possibility of being gored by a rhino was often at the forefront of my mind, I was also in constant denial. *It would never happen to me!* So why worry about it? But when it did happen - and I survived - at the back of my mind the experience was something of an anticlimax. It struck me that universe had really no right to have saved me.

That one blow was, nevertheless, nothing like I had ever imagined. To describe it, I must liken it to being held by a giant, by both ankles, and being thrown by him, with all his might, up against a heavy tree trunk. Except that it was the tree trunk that had hit me, not the other way round. The strike was

a solid dead weight. I had been totally helpless within its immense power.

Now it had happened. Now I knew!

I was not a heavy person. I weighed at that time, I guess, something like 160 pounds (less than 75 kilograms). I was tall, lean and athletically built, and I burnt off whatever fat my body accumulated with my very active hunting lifestyle. Had I weighed 200 pounds (90 kilograms) or more - like many less active young men of my age and height - there would have been more body mass for the rhino to move about and I would probably have had bones broken as a consequence. So I was very lucky to get away with just bruises.

But what bruises!

Ben and Siamweri got me to my feet. I was shaken to the core. My body was quivering all over and I was moving about insecurely like a tattered flag flying in a limp breeze. My body was ice cold yet I was sweating like a pig. My face *felt* white. I could feel my eyes stretched wide open. I tested my legs. No bones were broken. I walked a few paces. My muscles were responsive. I could walk, and as I walked the movement got easier.

“Have a look at my back,” I instructed Ben; and I gingerly pulled my shirt loose from the waistband of my short trousers.

The tracker had a good look. Running his rough hands over my back and ribs, following the fresh red stain of the new bruise right down to my buttocks.

“Hah!” he exclaimed in amazement. *“You are O.K. No broken skin. No blood!”*

I didn't feel O.K. I felt as if I had been worked over by a bulldozer. But the more I walked about the easier did it become; and the quicker did I start to return to something approaching normality.

But my God was I bruised! I could feel the contusion, particularly, penetrating deep into the muscles of my left thigh. There is fetched right

down to the bone. And it ran up my back and over the back of my left ribs. I was limping very badly and had a splitting headache.

“Did you get a dart in?” Ben asked me matter-of-factly,

My tracker knew me too well! I looked at him and nodded - thumping the tip of my finger hard into my breastbone. He smiled and shook his head.

“We going to follow it?”

“Of course.....”

“Are you up to it?”

I nodded again. *“I think so,”* I said hesitantly, believing that the more I walked the quicker would my already stiffening muscles loosen up.

“O.K.,” Ben said. And without further ado the tracker turned and, with his nose to the ground, he set off on the new set of galloping tracks. His pace was fast.

“Just take it easy,” I shouted at him.

He turned and our eyes met. He nodded. We had each other's measure. He would now not molly-coddle me. Neither would he overtax me. We would thus both retain our personal dignities; and we would find our rhino.

All the way along the rhino's tracks that day Ben was solicitous but unyielding. I had missed being gored by half-a-hair's breadth. I was seriously bruised and sore - but not nearly as sore as I was going to be over the next several days. The order of the day, however, had still to be fulfilled. We had to find this rhino and get it back safely into the holding pens back in camp.

It took us nearly two hours to find that rhino, not because the tracking was difficult but because my pace was, of necessity, very slow. As I had thought, however, my body slowly loosened up as I walked along and I was able to

count my blessings. I had been very lucky!

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When the rhino was back in camp and on its feet in the mopani-pole offloading pen - breathing easy - Rupert inspected my injuries thoroughly. He got me to strip down and to lie on my stomach on my camp stretcher bed; and he applied a liberal dose of a strong-smelling liniment to my pulverised muscles. The stench of what he called his *special muti* (medicine) was dominated by the strong smell of turpentine.

“*You were lucky,*” Rupert spoke slowly as he rubbed the embrocation into my battered flesh.

“*Huh!*” he then exclaimed with an intonation of mirth. He ran a finger in a long arching line right up my back - from low down up to the scapula on my left shoulder. “*You’ve got the perfect side-on mark of the rhino’s curved front horn right up your back.... but no broken bones... no broken skin.*” He poured on more of the muti and rubbed it into the bruises.

“*You were lucky,*” he said again - as if to convince *himself* this time. Again I did not reply. I lay flat on my belly with my forehead resting on my forearms, and I let the stinking *muti* soak into my bruised and aching body. It began to work wonders. Soon I felt the smouldering flush of *deep heat* seeping into my flesh.

“*The first time I got mugged by a rhino - on the (Kariba Lake) islands - I suffered three cracked ribs.*” Rupert said quietly, letting that information sink in. But he did not elaborate - didn’t say a word about how it had happened. I hadn’t known that Rupert had had a previous run in with a rhino. He never spoke about such things to me. “*Not... funny...*” he said after a while, in a measured tone, as he rubbed the solution in hard. “*Second time I was very lucky.... got away Scot free.*”

Rupert hadn’t mentioned any of this to me before! Not talking about himself was part of his intriguing, taciturn, persona. I was beginning to understand why nobody ever claimed to really *know* Rupert Fothergill.

Rupert had been knocked down by a rhino *twice* - which is probably why he had hardly turned a hair at my recital of the day's events. It seemed he had come to accept that getting knocked down by a rhino every now and again, came with the territory. If you were catching rhinos the way we were catching them in those days, the odd knock down was inevitable.

"What's that muti you used on me?" I asked Rupert as I was buttoning up my shirt. *"Smelled like an embrocation."*

"It is...." Rupert intoned, making a gesture to the bottle standing on the camp table. *"It is a very special embrocation! I use it all the time. Have done for years. My bush medical kit wouldn't be complete without a bottle. It's much better than anything that a doctor would prescribe."*

I picked up the bottle and read its label: *Ellimans Royal Embrocation*. There was a large *CAUTION* inscription in red which said: *Turpentine Oil.... 31,9% m/m; Acetic acid B.P..... 11.3% m/m*. And underneath that was a list of its recommended applications: *For the treatment of Rheumatism, Bruises, Sprains, Curb, Splints, Capped Hocks and Elbows in Horses, Cattle and Dogs*. There was a black-and-white sketch of a horse's head, complete with bridle, on the bottom. There was one other cautionary warning: *for external animal use only*.

It was veterinary embrocation and it had been in use for an awful long time. Its registration number was G36/1947. I have never been without a bottle in my own medical kit ever since.

Later that evening, I received a routine radio call from John Tebbit, my Provincial Game Warden and immediate superior, whose office was in faraway Bulawayo.

"Don't mention to him your run in with the rhino," Rupert cautioned me quickly. *"Just tell him that you darted a lovely big pregnant cow today; and that it is now well and safe on its feet in the pens. That will keep him happy. If he knows you got smacked around he will insist that you go see a medical doctor; or worse, he will replace you with some useless young ranger,*

without any experience, from one of the tourist parks.”

That warning was enough to keep my mouth shut forever.