A Hunter's Tales . . .

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 9

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)
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Dicing with death - the stupidity of youth

DO PEOPLE who 'dice with death' in their everyday work situations *really* have to test their mettle? I think, when men are young, they do. Certainly, as a young trainee fighter pilot in the Royal Rhodesian Air Force I, and all my several colleagues, did things with aeroplanes that aeroplanes are not supposed to do, and which young 'officers and gentlemen' should have enough sense *not* to do.

When I became an experienced and responsible senior game warden I would most certainly *not* have condoned any young man under my command doing most of the 'adventurous' things that I did when I was their age. Nevertheless, I know that those who 'dared and lived', in the long run, turned out to be the better hunters - and the best senior officers, too.

I shudder *now* to think about some of the really *stupid* things that I 'dared myself' to do in those early halcyon days. In order to accomplish many such feats, I had to get within touching distance of my quarry - and then live to tell the tale. *How* I survived many of these hare-brained ideas I will never know. Somebody 'up there' *must* have been looking after me in my youth.

A year after I arrived at Main Camp (c. late 1961), I 'thought' I had mastered the elephant brain shot and my then extravagant imagination demanded of me many great and foolish things. One of my most irresponsible ambitions was to get so close to an elephant bull that I could place my bullet *under* the cheekbone and get it into the brain. This required that I get within muzzle-poking distance of the elephant's closest front foot. It was a stupid idea and irresponsible. Nevertheless, I waited for my opportunity.

My chance came one day when I tracked a very large crop-raiding bull into the riverine forest on the lower Inyantue River near Wankie colliery. I found him standing alone in a really dense bit of heavy forest undergrowth. I could see both his fore-feet, a bit of rump and part of a tusk, at thirty yards. That was all.

As well as being dense, the bush was also sopping wet following a really heavy thunderstorm the previous afternoon. Underfoot the deep leaf litter was sodden so it was possible to move about silently over what was normally - when dry - a carpet of dry leaves that can only be likened to crisp breakfast cornflakes straight out the box. There was also a gentle but steady breeze blowing in my favour. There was no chance, therefore, that the elephant was going to pick up my scent.

My original intention had been to simply approach the animal to within an easy kill-distance and to 'take him out'. *That* is what I *should* have done. *That* was really *all* my job demanded. But as I drew closer I realised that the big bull was dozing fitfully in the steaming jungle. At fifteen yards I still could not get a clear shot at the brain. I told my trackers to retreat to a safe distance and I moved in closer alone. At ten yards I could have downed him by ploughing a bullet through some light twigs but by then I could see his softly shut eyelids - and his quiet steady breathing told me he was dreaming of other days. He was rocking backwards and forwards, gently, on his feet.

I realised then that here was a candidate for my stupid self-challenge. The animal was asleep, the bush cover was good, the ground cover was silent, and the wind was right. What more did I need?

At five paces I was virtually alongside the animal's tall shoulder - literally within touching distance of his hide. Still he slept on. I took another pace forward and reached the correct angle to put a bullet into the animal's brain from the side. Standing, however, I was still too high to get the bullet *right under* the cheekbone. All I had to do now was to

place one knee - my right knee - onto the ground and everything would be set.

Slowly I lowered my body, never taking my eyes off the sleeping giant, and I softly placed my bare knee into the wet leaves. Slowly . . . slowly . . . I shifted my weight forward onto my knee and - too late - I felt the heavy twig go 'snap' under my knee bone.

The eye in front of me sprang open instantly - and the big bull elephant looked directly down at my crouched figure right under his gaze. What happened next is still a blur. My rifle came up to my shoulder, the barrel tilted upwards, and I pulled the trigger. The elephant, in that flash of time, spun round and his trunk lashed out towards me.

The instant I pulled the trigger the elephant's trunk hit me and lifted me into the air. I went flying backwards some ten feet or so, and crashed into the heavy undergrowth. I was dazed. White points of light exploded before my eyes. I then felt, rather than saw, the great beast ploughing through the bushes right at my side! Fortunately he kept on going.

My trackers told me afterwards that the impact of the 500 grain .458 bullet had sent the big elephant reeling. It was *that* which undoubtedly saved my life - that and the shock experienced by the elephant at the sudden and frighteningly close encounter. The animal had not had enough time to work out how to react.

Had I remained in his vision the elephant would most certainly have killed me but my sudden disappearance into the dense brush probably induced him to make good his escape.



Whatever! I found myself hurting like hell but alive, and lying on my back with my rifle still in my hands. Not too far away I could hear the crashing sounds of the fast retreating elephant as he ploughed through the forest undergrowth.

I was shaken to the core, and my body was quaking quite out of control, but I now had a wounded elephant on my hands. I scrambled to my feet and raced after my quarry as best I could, ejecting the empty shell and pushing a live round into the breech. Once I was up and running my composure quickly returned.

The elephant was not far away only about twenty paces, in fact - when I saw him again. So I had not been down for long. He was by then in full flight, flattening the bushes in front of him, driving a tunnel through the forest as he ran along. I pumped my remaining three rounds into his rump, snap-aiming for the spine: *'Baaahm . Baaahm ... Baaahm . .'*. I saw him stagger, and hesitate, with the impact of each bullet. But he did not go down.

I raced after him, reloading as I ran. I stopped and fired again: *'Baaahm .. Baaahm ... Baaahm ... Baaahm '*. This time he slowed down to a mere shuffle. But when the shooting stopped he pushed on again, resolutely and silently. I lost sight of him.

At that stage I had employed a second Bushman tracker, Mbuyotsi, who now appeared at my side. He fed me two 'hands', one after the other, each holding two rounds, which I quickly stuffed into the rifle - three in the magazine and one up the spout. I raced on.

I saw the elephant again a little further on. He was still moving, slower now, but steadily. He was about fifty yards from me.

`Baaahm ... Baaahm ... Baaahm'.

I was firing as fast as I could, and I failed repeatedly to find the spine. Nevertheless, the 500 grain bullets were obviously playing havoc with the elephant's huge dorsal muscles, and some of those bullets *must* have penetrated the body cavity. What was happening inside there was anybody's guess.

I had one cartridge left in the magazine and Mbuyotsi was hovering next to my elbow with two more rounds in his hand. Then, all of a sudden, I realised that I had been firing wildly like a maniac. I was behaving like a mad man. Once that inspiration struck me I sobered instantly. Sliding the last cartridge very purposefully into the breech, I lifted the rifle again and, *this time,* I took careful and very calm aim at the retreating spine. I squeezed the trigger gently.

'Baaahm ...' The bullet snapped the spinal cord at the moment of impact. Instantly the big back legs splayed and the elephant rent the air with an agonising scream. I ran up to him and put him out of his misery with a bullet, delivered at very close quarters, through the brain. That was the last time I played 'silly buggers' with an elephant. I was sore and bruised for weeks - the inside of my right thigh, the front part of my right hip, and my right rib-cage having taken all the punishment. I didn't let on to any of my colleagues that I had been injured by an elephant and my two trackers were sworn to secrecy.

I was very fortunate to have gotten off so lightly. I could have had broken bones. I could have broken my back. I could have lost my life. These were all sobering thoughts.

This incident *also,* finally and unequivocally, rammed into my obstinate mind an obvious truth about the spine shot. I had learnt the lesson before, but I had clearly not heeded what I'd observed - that *wild shooting at an elephant's backbone rarely finds the target.* Indeed, wild shooting rarely finds *any* target.

After this ridiculous incident I was always far more careful with the spine shot. Thereafter, I took my time and I aimed calmly and carefully

at the very heart (the core) of the backbone ridge before squeezing off the trigger.

One learns from one's mistakes - *if you live through the experience.*

* * *

A Pongoro Ranch elephant hunt

Over the years I learned that I did not have to look for trouble. Trouble had a happy knack of finding me - and when it happened it came suddenly and quite out of the blue.

I was called out one day to deal with a group of elephant bulls that were damaging water installations on Pongoro Ranch just outside the Hwange game reserve boundary near Lukosi. The corrugated iron pump house protecting the pump and diesel engine had been demolished and galvanised piping had been ripped from the ground. As there was water in the nearby dam, the damage, which amounted to several thousand dollars' worth, was absolutely wanton and could only be described as animal vandalism.

Three big bulls were the culprits and we tracked them into the nearby basalt hills where their spoor became intermingled with the tracks of other elephants. It was only through the remarkable tracking abilities of my Bushman tracker, Ben, that we were able to unravel the jigsaw. Such tracks were what we described as 'yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's' spoor.

The month was September. It was hot and dry and all the trees had shed their leaves *except* for one. The Pod Mahoganies were all in their fresh spring foliage and we knew that we'd find the elephants standing in the shade of one of them. And, sure enough, that is how

we found them.

A fickle wind gave the elephants our scent, however, and we were soon to discover that the old bull in the group was a wily old veteran. He led the way and he ran *with* the wind. We spent the whole day following those elephants uphill and down dale. All day long they kept on going, all the time running *with* the wind. We flushed them repeatedly, hearing them run before we ever saw them, because each time we drew near our sweating body odours preceded us.

In those days I knew nothing of escape circles or attack circles and I gave no thought to the fact that every time we flushed our quarry we were winding up their tempers. And I was so inexperienced at that time I could not 'feel' their animosity building up as it most certainly was.

As the heat dissipated in the late afternoon so the stiff breeze that had been blowing all day dropped. At last our ash bags told us that the wind had been reduced to mere eddies that swirled around between the hot open ground and the cool patches of shade nearby.

By now I was a keen student of the ash bag and every morning I packed the soft, fresh, white wood ash of last night's campfire into an old linen tobacco pouch. This I kept in the right top pocket of my hunting shirt and I used it regularly throughout every hunt. Holding the little bag between thumb and forefinger, with arm extended, one light flick of the wrist sent a cloud of white powder into the air - and this was wafted about by whatever air currents were around. It allowed us to 'see' the direction of the invisible wind.

We found the elephants about two hours before sunset. They were standing quite still and absolutely silent in what the Bushmen call 'sinanga' - Hwange National Park’s version of the thick 'jesse bush' of the Zambezi valley. The brush was bare of leaves. And it was grey - the colour of an elephant’s body - and they just melded into the cryptic colouring. If it had not been for the trackers, who picked up the elephants immediately they came into view, I would have overlooked

them completely.

All three bulls were standing with drooping heads, their immobile ears flat against their shoulders. Late afternoon is *a* time of day when they should have been up and about and feeding heavily. Instinctively, therefore, I knew they were waiting for us, listening intently for our expected approach. I should have known that trouble was coming then, when I saw their silent and expectant dispositions, but I didn't. My only concern was that they might run away again. I was still far too 'green' to understand the ‘signs’ in those days.

I understood immediately that the very big and tuskless old bull in the front was leading the group. Both his tusks had been broken off inside the lip and I discovered later he only had one eye, the other having been long ago poked out by the tusk of a rival. His face was scarred and heavily wrinkled, too, so he must have been a warrior of some note when he was in his prime. The other two bulls were fully mature but they were smaller and younger. I tested the wind and immediately began picking my way through the heavy cover towards the elephants. Both trackers followed quietly on my heels.

In those days it was Ben who carried my second rifle (on that day it was a .375 Magnum) but neither he nor Mbuyotsi knew, then, how to use it. Later, it was Mbuyotsi who carried the second weapon and he became, what often turned out to be, my protector. Indeed, he became an elephant hunter of some note on his own account, too.

No sooner had I begun my stalk than the old bull moved quietly off, his huge ears rasping hoarsely against the stiff stems of the bushes. Something had disturbed him. Perhaps he had heard us? Perhaps he was just being cautious? The two younger bulls followed his lead.

I increased my pace, zig-zagging frantically through the heavy brush - moving when the elephants moved - stopping when they stopped - travelling forward only when the sound of their own passage would mask the noise of my approach.

When the elephants stopped they stood absolutely still, their ears quite motionless. It was plain to see they were then listening intently. And I knew, intuitively, that they were listening for some sound that would *again* betray our pursuit.

Having been pushed from pillar-to-post all day long these elephants were now well primed for a confrontation with the men who had been harassing them. And still I did not see it. I could 'feel' nothing of their animosity. All I could think about was being able to get close enough to kill them before they once again ran away.

The elephants moved off through one pocket of thicket and into the next. They travelled slowly - stopping repeatedly. Listening! Moving off again! The wind was now no impediment to a close approach, so it did not take me long to position myself just five yards away and right behind the tuskless old bull. I walked along quietly on his tail waiting for the opportunity that I knew would come.

We were moving through an open place when the big bull turned his head sideways to peer backwards over his left shoulder. He was not expecting to see me at all. He was certainly not expecting to see me so close on his tail. When he did see me his eye widened in shocked surprise and he started to swing round to face me.

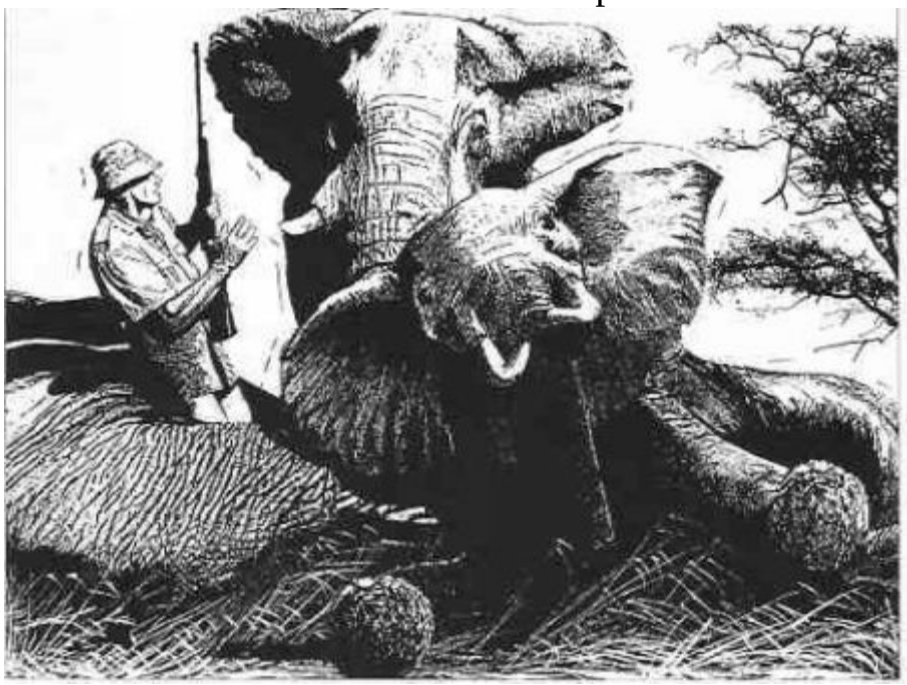
Too late! My bullet gouged through the panel of his left ear, penetrated the back of his neck, and smashed into his brain from behind. I recognised the instant vacant look that came into his eye and I knew he was dead before he crashed to the ground.

The other two bulls were but a few yards away from their leader - on either side of him. Their reaction to the shot was instantaneous. The moment the shot rang out they turned and, as if they had rehearsed the play, they simultaneously put their heads down and rushed at me.

This was a circumstance I had not encountered before. Never had I been charged by *two* irate elephant bulls at the same time, and at such close quarters. I knew I did not have time to deal with them both. And I understood also, in that flashing moment of time, that I was no longer in control of the situation. It was a frightening experience.

The first of the two younger bulls was on me before I could properly analyse my predicament. His head was down and he was coming hard and fast - like an express train. I had no time to think. I had no time to aim. I simply pointed the rifle at the elephant's forehead and pulled the trigger. He skidded to a halt at the end of the rifle's barrel; and down he went. I was by then, perforce, already turning towards the other animal.

Time was still not on my side for the third bull was by then right on top of me. I rammed a round onto the chamber and blasted off precipitously into his face. My shot was un-aimed, intuitive, and it missed the brain. This time the elephant did not go down. At the instant of the bullet's impact, he squeezed his eyes shut - tight - and he staggered to the side. This gave me just enough time to scurry backwards between the bodies of the two elephant carcasses.



I tripped and landed on my bottom, rocking backwards. Lying flat on my back I rammed the last cartridge in the magazine into the breech. I scrambled to my feet intent upon putting to death the wounded elephant that was still dazed and tottering not ten yards away in front of me. My bullet had clearly only *just* missed the animal's brain.

My plan was not to be, however, for suddenly the downed animal at my side began scrambling to its feet. I fell back against the carcass of the old bull and I watched, horrified, as the stricken animal lurched sideways in its efforts to regain its feet. I was in imminent danger of being squashed between the two great bodies - and, abandoning all other thoughts, I scrambled frantically backwards to get out of the way.

I had only just escaped from between the two crumpled bodies when the first young bull regained its feet. It stood for a brief moment gathering its senses. It shook its head once and stumbled forward growling angrily. Groping its way it shambled purposefully into the thicket directly to its fore, gaining power with every step.

I raced after him and, getting in an angled shot from the side-rear, I slammed a bullet into his lungs.

My rifle was now empty. Mbuyotsi was at my side. He began feeding me ammunition. Three rounds in the magazine and one up the spout - and I was off after the young bull I had just shot in the lungs. He was staggering away slowly in the nearby sinanga, moaning and groaning. Then I saw the lung blood gushing from his trunk. He was finished. I abandoned him immediately knowing he was going nowhere, and I rushed back to relocate the other young bull. It was nowhere in sight.

I put the lung-shot elephant out of its misery and we all sat down beside the carcass of the old bull and had a five minutes break. The near-empty canvas josak (water bag) was handed round and we each enjoyed a couple of mouthfuls of cool clear water. I needed the time and the sane company of my trackers to calm my shattered nerves. It

had been a very near thing. Nevertheless, we chatted calmly about what had happened.

We followed the tracks of the head-shot elephant until dark and we marked the spot where we abandoned the spoor with a stone cairn. Then we walked to the nearest road dragging a heavy stick behind us to clearly mark the trail. The next morning we returned and took up the spoor again - but we lost it in the 'yesterdays, today's and tomorrow's' tracks resultant from the heavy elephant traffic that had occurred during the night.

That was the first elephant that I wounded and did not recover. It only happened twice in my entire career.



The tuskless old Pongoro bull, with only one eye — the blind eye seen here — which nearly put paid to the author's career almost before it had begun.

Within a month of the last incident I was back on Pongoro Ranch for exactly the same reason. The ranch owner had repaired the damage to his water installations only to have a herd of twelve bulls repeat what two other bulls had already paid for with their lives. The new pump house was torn apart and the new piping was ripped from the ground.

We found the herd easily by eleven o'clock that morning. They had only travelled about five miles from the demolished pump house and they were spread out resting in open mopani woodland when we caught up with them. They were quite silent. Some were dosing quietly. Others were enjoying a dust bath. Yet others were feeding desultorily from the woodland undergrowth.

The air was absolutely dead. So we had no trouble approaching, undetected, to within about twenty yards of the main group of six animals. Now I had to decide which one to kill first. They were all very big bulls and they all appeared to be carrying good ivory, so I selected one that had only one tusk. *That* one would be my first victim (As a national park game warden, I never shot big tusked elephants unless I absolutely had to). After him my second choice would depend upon which animal presented the next best target - for by then I knew they would all be running.

The single-tusker was standing broad-side on to me - an easy target. I leant up against the thick bole of the big mopani tree behind which cover we had made our approach and I dropped him with a single shot. I reloaded and looked for my next target . . . and suddenly realised that I had a problem.

In typical bull fashion, the surviving eleven bulls did not even try to locate the danger. No sooner had the shot been fired than they took off at the high port, racing hell bent for leather *right in our direction.* And as they came towards us they bunched closer and closer together.

I had with me my two trackers, Ben and Mbuyotsi, and another

youngster, an apprentice tracker, who was carrying the two water bags. There were no funk holes anywhere. There were no rocks to hide behind - no gullies to jump into.

The mopani woodland was wide open and flat. The trees were big but ten yards apart. And none of them was climbable - but then we didn't have time enough to climb a tree, anyway.

Panic gripped our young assistant but as he turned to run Mbuyotsi caught him by the scruff of the neck. Without ceremony he pushed the young man up against the bole of the tree and clamped himself tight behind him. Ben snuck in and hung onto Mbuyotsi's back.

Standing alongside my black staff, I turned to face the broad phalanx of stampeding bull elephants. They were running so close together now that I could hear the rasp of their hides as their bodies jostled together in their flight.

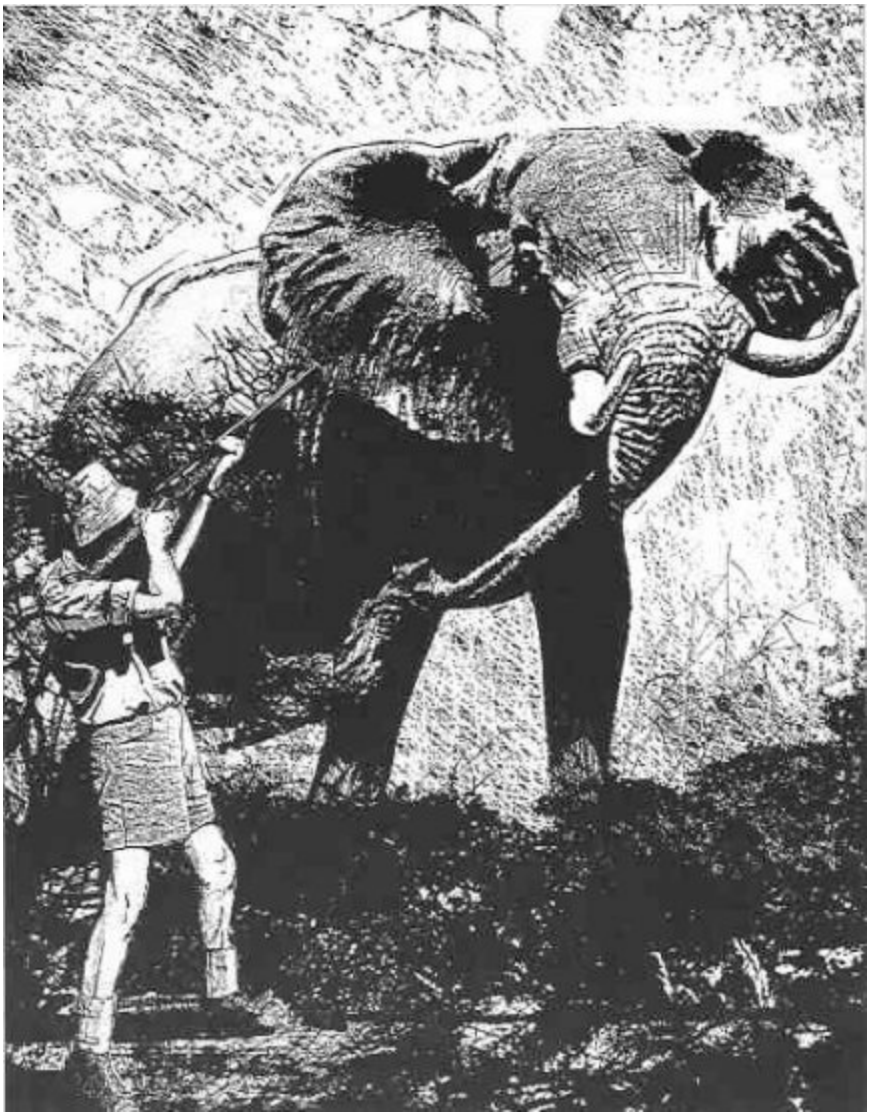
I had begun the hunt with the intention of taking out as many bulls as I could manage. I had felt confident that I could kill at least five before they ran out of range. After that it would be a matter of tracking and catching up with them five miles away amongst the hills. This 'Charge of the Light Brigade', however, had happened quite unexpectedly, and as I saw the picture developing the unbelievable reality of it quite took the wind out of my sails. For a few seconds there, as I began to understand what was happening, I truly lost my wits.

Now I had my wits back again.

The elephants were almost on top of us before the two leading bulls split to avoid hitting our mopani tree, and as they moved apart they both saw me standing there in front of them. By then, however, they were committed to their flight path and they were being held in their positions by the elephants on either side, and by those that were pushing from behind.

My next bullet hit the right-hand bull full in the face. He collapsed in a heap right in front of the tree. *That* one, at least, now provided me with a bulwark over which the other elephants would not run.

Then they were all around us; running past within touching distance. Bumping into each other! Stumbling! Those nearest to us looked sideways down their noses at us. They pushed away sideways against the elephants alongside them as they, wide-eyed now, tried to get away from the humans that they suddenly saw in their midst.



And they opened their bowels, and there was the sweet stench of fresh excrement, and of heavy musth, everywhere.

I jacked a round into the breech and virtually poked the rifle barrel into the ear of the elephant that was brushing past the far side of the tree. B*aaahm.'* He went down - falling towards us - and rolled over kicking his top back leg high. The men behind the tree swayed away from the new carcass to avoid its violent death throes.

I threw now myself against the tree trunk, my back barging into Mbuyotsi, as another elephant careered past on my right hand side. Its eyes were wide with fear and its trunk was flailing dangerously. If I had wanted another chance to try putting a bullet under an elephant's cheekbone and into its brain this was it - but the opportunity was gone in a flash.

'B*aaahm'*. My bullet caught the big elephant just behind the lower jaw and, angling upwards it smashed through the back of the skull and into the brain.

The animal's toes dug into the ground. In full flight it hit the ground on its brisket, ploughing forward on its chest, its two great tusks running along the ground like giant skis before it. When the carcass ground to a halt the front legs were thrust backwards on either side under the chest, and the hind legs were splayed out, sticking backwards, acting like huge bi-pods holding the body erect. It didn't move a muscle.

As suddenly as it had begun the excitement was over. What was left of the herd was past us, each animal running for all it was worth to put distance between itself and the hunters. All I had to shoot at was a wall of elephant posteriors. I watched them go with great relief.

The men disengaged themselves from their entanglement and we stood looking at each other - sheepishly - almost choking in the pall of dust that the elephants had left behind. Our young assistant's wide and

unbelieving eyes reflected all the fear and anxiety, and relief, that I am sure all of us really felt - but which Ben, Mbuyotsi and I never ever acknowledged.

"Hah! . . Hah!" Mbuyotsi said, shaking his head with incredulity. "Aaiiieee . . . Nkosi! No man! Yena faaahnie... Yena faaahnie ."

I didn't think it had been 'funny' at all.

xxxxx

The Ruziruhuru killer bulls

HUGE golden-brown seed heads hung heavily from the tall thick sorghum stalks high over my head. They were fully fifteen feet above the ground. The centre of the crop was like a bamboo jungle and I felt my nerve-ends tingling as I wound my way through the cropland. Ben and Mbuyotsi tagged on behind.

Ahead of me the Tonga youth, who had elected to guide me from the village to the scene of the tragedy, led the way with a casual indifference. He was seemingly oblivious to the horror of the previous night's events - events that had taken place in this very cropland.

Bravado. I thought. *He doesn't want to show his fear in the presence of Mahohboh.*

'Mahohboh' was my native honour-name. The Ba-Tonga used nothing else when discussing me. It had many interpretations: one being ‘The great slayer of elephants’.

In the near distance I could hear the subdued clamour of many people's voices - muffled through the dense field of sorghum canes.

The elephants had had a grand time during the night leaving broad avenues of devastation where they had bulldozed their way through the lush green foliage. At one point, in the centre of the land, an area half the size of a football field had been virtually obliterated. Here the trampled and broken sorghum stalks lay helter skelter in disarray upon the ground. This was where the five big elephant bulls had settled down to fill their bellies with the sweet ripening grain.

The elephants had collectively pushed down several big mopani trees on the edge of the land in their frenzied panic after their butchery of the old headman - and what was left of his body appeared to be wrapped around the horizontal trunk of one of them. I looked down at the body and had difficulty in recognising the mass of blackened flesh as human remains at all.

The dark shattered ends of both the man's thigh-bones, and of one of his upper arms, protruded from the torn and soil-besmirched flesh. They looked like distorted plumbing pipes in the crumbled masonry of a demolished building. His pulverised entrails cascaded from beneath the hollow carcass like dirty ragged linen. They were unrecognisable as intestines and they were devoid of contents having been repeatedly trampled by the animal's huge feet and ripped into shreds. And, like the rest of the body, the damp and exposed visceral tissues were impregnated with the murky grime of the cryptic mopani soils over which they had been dragged and pummelled by the enraged pachyderms.

Huge rotund blue-bottle flies, and others with flat grey bodies, explored the distorted heap of flesh, depositing little bundles of cream-coloured eggs, and tiny white larval worms, respectively, in whatever damp grooves and crevices they could find. An old woman sat alongside the body wafting a leafy branch to chase off the persistent insects. It was a futile exercise for no sooner did she cease her activity than they returned directly to the cadaver. Whenever she moved the flies took to the air with an angry buzzing hum.

The most bizarre damage was done to the man's head. One of the elephants had obviously picked up his body and whipped it against a tree trunk, exploding the cranium with the impact. His entire skull was missing from above the eyebrows and there was a long jagged tear across the scalp through which the bone had burst from its dermal envelope. The man's glazed eyes, coated with a thin layer of grey dust, looked vacantly out of the distorted skull like some grotesque Neanderthal monster.

One of the villagers had recovered the victim's brain, intact, from somewhere in the surrounding bush. He had ceremoniously laid it on a pile of green leaves next to the body. There its pale grey mass was already darkening with dehydration in the warm dry air and from the constant attentions of the ubiquitous flies.

The elephants had at first covered the body with leafy branches. Then they had picked up several of the big trees they had pushed down and they had piled their entire masses on top of the bedecked carcass. The resulting rustic crypt left me with the strange and extraordinary feeling that, in the end, the animals had been consciously sorry for what they had done and that by thus venerating the old man's remains they had hoped to somehow be absolved of their murderous crime.

There was a group of about eighty people gathered about the dead man's body when I arrived on the scene. Most of them were women but there were several men and many more children. Every minute more and more people filtered in through the trees from the nearby villages. They completely ignored me since I was clearly being attended by one of their young men.

Most of the women, clothed in their scanty traditional dress, sat quietly on the ground their legs stretched out straight along the ground in front of them. Many had their babies still strapped to their backs. There was a look of forlorn but stoic acceptance on their stone-like faces. Some

were crying quietly to themselves.

Bulbous Ba-Tonga hookah pipes were abundantly obvious amongst the female groups. The thick stems of the gourds completely filling the women's toothless maws as neatly as the pieces of a jigsaw fitted into their picture puzzles. All around me there were the disgusting, nauseating sounds of dagga fumes being sucked gutturally through water, and the opaque blue smoke and pungent aroma of marijuana drifted through the gathering.

The men, dressed sparsely in an assortment of ragged European clothes, were more vocal. They were standing around in groups of twos and threes, or squatting on their heels, quietly discussing the circumstances of the tragedy.

Periodically one or another of the men would burst into excited chatter, gesticulating wildly with his hands, as he described to new arrivals the events of the night before.

Each man rested the short flat heel spike of at least one spear on the ground in front of him. The shafts they held at shoulder height, the blades thrust skywards. Some men had two even three spears and there were several knobkierie Tonga axes.

An assemblage of old crones sat apart in the shade of a big tree. They were engaged in a dramatic show of noisy and demonstrative weeping and wailing. The group emitted a constant keening racket and they periodically ululated in the manner that is typical of grieving African women everywhere. They, I presumed, were the official mourners that custom demanded.

One lamenting young woman was screaming and crying hysterically. She was being forcefully retrained by two older women who were trying desperately to placate her. This woman I surmised must have been one of the deceased’s younger wives.

The children sat amongst the gathering of adults. They stared wide-eyed and in bemused bewilderment at the primitive rituals, but they were all clearly most greatly enthralled by misshapen remains of the old man.

'They shouldn't be here', was my immediate thought. 'The children shouldn't be allowed to see what the elephants have done to the old headman'.

The victim was probably the children's father, or their uncle - certainly a close relative. I began to wonder what this horrifying experience would do to their young and impressionable minds. Then, I realised: This was real Africa. What the children were experiencing was part and parcel of the culture on the Ba-Tonga people. Death was an integral part of life, and life's processes were not hidden from them no matter what their age.

I shut my mind to the caterwauling of the mourners and to the hysterical screaming of the demented young woman. And I myself became mesmerized by what the elephants had done to the old Sabooku (headman). I repeatedly cast my eyes back to the grisly remains. My skin began to crawl. I had seen and handled more dead bodies during my game ranging career than I cared to remember. Some had been eaten by lions, others terribly mangled in motorcar accidents. But this man's death was poignantly much more personal.

This was only my second elephant-related death, but it was more horrifying somehow than the last one - and I became subconsciously very aware that this could have happened to me half-a-dozen times over the last few years. '*There, but for the grace of God, go I',* were my unspoken thoughts. And the words passed repeatedly through my mind.

The distorted body held an almost hypnotic fascination for me. And as I stared at the gruesome corpse the hair on the nape of my neck rose and fell, and it rose again and again and again in a seeming state of

perpetual motion. The sensation was almost aphrodisiacal. Goose pimples erected and disappeared, and reappeared, along my arms and the same sensation crept up and down my spine. It writhed erotically in the private nether regions of my crotch. My whole body tingled with vibrant prickles.

There was no doubt at all that the horror of the elephant's attack on the old Tonga was having a profound effect upon my subliminal mind. I felt my face blanch. My brow was suddenly cold as ice and I knew that the shock must be evident in the pallor and wide-eyed cast of my face. Even so, the experience was like a drug. I could not disengage myself from the terrifying reality of the spectre before me.

Ben and Mbuyotsi had quickly taken in the scene. They had appeared outwardly unmoved by the victim's horrific mutilations. Upon our arrival at the gathering they had immediately moved beyond the throng and had set about canvassing the ground for sign. Theirs had been a far more business-like approach than was mine.

The elephants had been in a hurry to vacate the scene after the 'burial' of their victim's body and the Bushmen had no trouble locating the tracks. The five big bulls had left a broad thoroughfare behind them as they had raced off into the night.

I was surrounded by a hubbub of human noises but I was immediately alerted by Mbuyotsi's signal. It was the loudly mimicked far-reaching whooping call of the spotted hyena. It brought me back to reality. I looked up. The tracker, seeing he had caught my attention, raised his arm and waved it forward to indicate the direction the elephants had taken in their flight.

Thus distracted, I turned to the young man who had guided me to the scene: "Mdoda,"(young man) I addressed him in the local language.

"Yebo, Nkosi," the young man responded with obvious trepidation. He knew what my question was going to be. And, with the remains of

the old man in front of him now, the young Tonga was not at all sure he wanted to hunt down the five animals that had been responsible for the carnage.

"I want you to come with me on the hunt."

As always it was necessary and customary for someone from the village to accompany us. The villagers' part of the unspoken social contract was to recover the ivory. Besides that, someone had to know where the carcasses lay for the meat had to be collected. Despite the tragedy none of the mourners would show any reticence about recovering and eating the meat of the killer elephants once they had been felled by my bullets. Life still had to go on and meat was an important ingredient in the processes of that life.

"How about us, Nkosi? We want to come on the hunt with you, too."

Surprisingly three other young men, jostling each other for my attention, volunteered to travel with us. Obviously their desire for fresh meat greatly exceeded their fear of the big pachyderms. It was, after all, an infrequent event to have one of their tribe killed by a crop raider and it was most unlikely that such a calamitous misfortune would strike twice in a single day.

I chose two of the stronger looking youths from the group and declared: "Two kupelah." *Just two.*

I had long ago learnt that a large entourage became cumbersome and was far too noisy on a hunt. Two trackers, and one or two helpers, were all that was necessary.

"Right. Go and take the 'majosaks' from the trackers," I instructed them.

And so the pattern of the hunt was set. Mbuyotsi carried his own issue Mauser 9.3 mm - the light rifle he liked to use when acting as my back-

up hunter. Ben carried my .458 Magnum. The two trackers took the lead; I followed; and the two Ba-Tongas followed a little distance behind carrying the water bags.

The elephants had taken off in a straight line that led diagonally away from the fields. The spoor indicated they had set off at a very fast pace, running with their long loping strides. They left a trail behind them that a blind man could have followed and the trackers quickly ate up the miles in their pursuit.

I could just visualise the five big bulls running along with their long shuffling gait, three feet always on the ground.

The elephants did not slow down for at least five miles and the tracking was so easy the Bushmen virtually ran along the spoor. I had to caution them to slow down several times. Indeed, their pace was so fast I found myself perpetually out of breath. Notwithstanding their apparent nonchalance at the killing of the old Tonga, I quickly realised that the fervour with which the Bushmen were undertaking their tracking duties today was a manifestation of the fact that their blood was up. They too, wanted to see retribution done.

The elephants slowed down only when they reached the strip of riverine forest that grew along the steep banks of the sandy Nabusenga River. There was some sign of desultory feeding amongst the tall acacias and under the spreading sausage trees that grew along the river bank. And here we came across the first fresh droppings of the day. It was a sign that made me think the elephants might be overcoming their earlier panic.

The dung was saturated with sorghum seeds from the pillaging of their victim's crops. The seeds that had been un-crushed by the animals' huge molars, had passed through the elephants' stomachs in a whole and undigested state.

As we arrived at the dry river bed we flushed a flock of guinea fowl

that had been eating from the dung. The big fat birds had been busily scratching through the muck like blue spotted chickens.

All the other signs, however, indicated the elephants had still been very restless. They had quickly crossed the river and then the main Binga-to-Siabuwa dirt road beyond. From there they joined a broad well-beaten elephant path that took them towards the uninhabited foothills of the Chizarira escarpment. Directly ahead of us, in the hazy far distance, I could see the distinct cleavage in the continuous range of steep red cliffs that demarcated the entrance to the wide Ruziruhuru river gorge.

Once amongst the talus slopes of the mountain range the elephants had slowed down, but they still travelled steadily towards the sanctuary of the game reserve. They moved continuously in single file and they never left the old game trail. Following the spoor, therefore, was an easy task. It would, in fact, have been quite pleasant except for the oppressive heat and the discomfort caused by the copious sweat that streamed from our every pore.

The ancient game path meandered through the rugged hills of the high escarpment. It seemed to be progressing inexorably towards the river gorge. And the further we travelled along its route the more I felt the path would lead us directly into the mouth of the narrow re-entrant.

There were piles of older elephant dung along the path now. And there were green shoots of germinating sorghum and watermelon seeds emerging from the damp piles of the old and fetid excrement. This was obviously a path used regularly by this group of crop-raiders and I felt even more justified to be on their trail.

The ground was damp from an entire season's rainfall and the tracking, even on the hard gravelly soils, was not at all difficult. The searing hot sun was directly overhead when we began to descend into the mouth of the Ruziruhuru gorge and it was here we discovered the next batch of fresh droppings. The elephants were, at last, slowing

down. We had covered perhaps fifteen tortuous miles since leaving the body of the old man but the spoor was still that of the night before. Even so, those piles of dung which were in the shade were still oozing fluids.

High on the dry ridge above the river an alert little squirrel rushed down from the cover of a nearby mopani tree. It ran right in front of us and cheekily snatched up a tiny handful of the liquid excrement. This it held briefly to its mouth as it drank some of the foul fluid. Then it anxiously filled its mouth with undigested grain and rushed back to the safety of the tree. I had no doubt it would return again and again to the dung heaps during the day, and during the days that were to follow, until no grain remained. Thus do benefits flow from one animal to another in the ecological pattern of nature.

The elephants had drunk and bathed in a big river pool at the entrance to the gorge. Then they had crossed over the shallow rapids to the far bank. There they had picked up another well-beaten trail that followed the river's upstream course between the high red sandstone cliffs. And so they had progressed into the very heart of the escarpment.

A mile into the narrow silent gorge the five elephant bulls had entered a pocket of heavy thicket that was contained within a secondary gully. Here vertical cliffs dropped right down to the floor of the flat-bottomed ravine on either side. At the far end of the little canyon a steep broken slope fell between the cliffs forming a box-like cul-de-sac. The hills at this point, therefore, created a natural amphitheatre that encompassed the pocket of dense bush. It was here at about dawn that morning, the still fretful elephants had gone to ground.

All along the spoor I had noticed that the behaviour of the retreating elephants had been far from normal. They were acting guiltily, like delinquent schoolboys who had raided an orchard - only their crime was far more heinous. It was as if they understood they had, this time, committed the unforgivable act.

I could sense the wrought up tension in the elephants' temperaments. It was contained in every strange circumstance of their flight. Not once, for example, had they stopped to rest. And only once had they made any attempt to feed - on the Nabusenga. Even then it had been very brief. In fact, in retrospect, I realised they had probably not then stopped with the object of feeding at all. The purpose of their temporary halt on the Nabusenga, despite the fact they were moving in the dead of night when most people were sound asleep, was probably to listen for human activity on the dirt road that ran parallel to the river's course beyond. Even in their disturbed state of mind, therefore, they had not been prepared to race blindly across what they knew to be the principal dirt motorway in the area without first making sure the coast was clear.

Throughout their hasty decampment it was patently obvious that, after their bloody slaughter of the old village headman, the elephants' sole intention had been to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the scene of the encounter.

Standing at the edge of the thicket in the gorge now I pondered all these things. And I concluded that if the killer bulls were in this pocket of thicket now it meant they must have gone into hiding at the first hint of dawn. That, too, was atypical. There was, therefore, no doubt in my mind that the elephants were thoroughly aroused and acutely agitated. Realising this, I became apprehensive.

So when the trackers, having heard the familiar sounds of bull elephants at their siesta, pointed confidently into the dense bush in front of us, my growing consternation turned to fear.

I felt suddenly ashamed. '*I am an experienced elephant hunter, dammit. Why the hell am I so scared?' I* had tackled this kind of problem many times before. I *knew* I could handle it. *So what the hell was the matter with me?*

No matter how I tried to steel my nerves, however, I could not shake

off the terrible foreboding that swamped my being. Confronted now, with the prospect of entering that terribly dense thicket to shoot the five killer elephants, filled me with terror.

I could not help it. I cast my mind back to the mangled remains of the old Tonga man and I could feel the blue funk soaking into my soul.

I looked at the hostile wall of impenetrable vegetation and I knew I had no option. I was going to *have* to go into that thicket and aggressively wipe out all five of the big bulls. And I knew they were already mentally disturbed and thoroughly agitated by the experience of the recent night's bloody encounter. They would be *totally* unpredictable.

The dread soaked through my body and, despite the heat, my sweat felt cold and clammy on the surface of my skin.

Ben and Mbuyotsi were waiting. I felt terrible - and humbled - and I imagined both my trackers were eyeing me with suspicious speculation.

My trackers were not fools. I knew that they, too, had noted the abnormally strange mood of the elephants. They would also know that I was very hesitant at that moment - and their lives were also at stake. They were required to follow me, a strangely very hesitant white man this day, into that tangled jungle. I could feel them watching me with more than an academic interest.

I knew both the trackers were acutely conscious of the fact that their joint safety depended upon *my* ability to competently handle the dangerous situation that now faced us. This applied to Ben, particularly, because he carried no weapon.

There come certain times in every hunter's life when his true mettle is fully tested. And in the brief second that thought took to cross my mind I realised that, for me, one of those moments of truth had arrived.

Despite all my previous hunting successes, and my undoubted ability to kill elephants cleanly and competently, I felt all my confidence draining from my soul.

I flicked my wrist. A small cloud of white dust puffed out from the tiny ash bag in my fingers. It wafted upstream along the course of the rocky Ruziruhuru river bed. My hand was shaking visibly so I quickly returned the little bag to my pocket. I concentrated my attention on the slow progress the pool of white wood ash made as it floated away on the invisible flow of air. The two trackers watched it, too, until the veil of whiteness dissipated amongst the sparse cover of wiry grass on the ground. The breeze, at least, was steady.

Mbuyotsi caught my eye. He pointed silently into the thicket then brought his hand down. Pointing his index finger to the ground he twirled it round and round in continuous circles – as if he was stirring a cup of tea. *Within the thicket,* he was telling me, *the wind pattern would be erratic and unreliable.*

I nodded. *I knew that, dammit! What did he take me for - a kid? I* was being unreasonable. I knew it and I took myself in hand.

Mbuyotsi looked at me seriously for several long moments. Our eyes locked. We each understood what the other was thinking. There was n o need for words between us. Finally he made a gesture that suggested we should hug the upstream wall of the little amphitheatre and cut into the elephants' position from that direction.

Such an approach would not cut off the elephants' only avenue of escape. So it was a relatively safe proposition. It was also on the leeward side of the general flow of the wind. It was a good idea. I nodded my approval.

My mouth was parched and my chest was tight with an anxious anticipation. My nerves were wound up like a tight watch-spring inside my chest and my whole body tingled with the tension. I

glanced over my shoulder hoping to retrieve a josak from one of the Tongas. I needed a long drink of water before starting the last phase of the hunt.

Neither of the young black men was anywhere in sight - and they had taken the water bags with them.

"DAMN", I exclaimed out loud. Then I thought: *'Just when I really need a good swallow of water the bastards are gone'.*

Ben smirked and shook his head.

Mbuyotsi inclined his head gesturing diffidently towards the thicket. *We are here to do a job a work,* he intimated quite clearly, *so let's get on with it.*

We wound our way round to the left of the elephants' position keeping the wall of sandstone on our left hand flank. The bush was very thick and I picked my way carefully, stooping under horizontal branches, stepping round others. My apprehension grew with every step and I cursed myself for my stupid weakness. It was all in my mind, I knew, but my fear was very real. The palms of my hands were sticky with sweat and, as was my normal practice, I regularly wiped away the wetness on the front of my khaki shorts.

I led the way. Mbuyotsi followed his 9.3 mm Mauser at the ready. Ben was close behind Mbuyotsi, a packet of .458 cartridges in his left hand. There were two shiny brass shells clamped between the fingers of his right hand. Ben was already prepared to feed me ammunition when the shooting started.

My unease did not diminish with the exertion of the stalk, and the dryness in my throat developed into a nagging ache.

I could hear the gentle flapping of the elephants' ears as they fanned themselves, the heavy cartilage periodically banging hollowly against

their shoulders. It was a sound that told me the elephants were resting in the shade of some large tree in front of us. As we approached closer we picked up an occasional *whoooshing* sigh as one of the elephants expelled a lungful of hot air. Once in a while one animal or another growled softly in its throat, the resonant sound permeating ominously through the scrubby woodland.

There was the sound of sand being thrown onto an elephant's back. It brought to my mind many other hunts where unsuspecting elephants had also carried out such dusty ablutions. I visualised the animal using its trunk to shovel a handful of sand high above its head and I could hear the tinkling noise the sand grains made as they cascaded down onto the nearby leaves.

We progressed purposefully through the dense, heavily leafed, thicket. I was thankful that the dead leaves on the ground were still soft and pliant from the last fall of rain. Our footfalls, at least, were reasonably silent.

Visibility was reduced to between ten and twenty feet. It was madness to continue - but we carried on. And the tension of our silent and blind approach to the five killer bulls, under these suicidal conditions, did nothing to reduce my developing phobia. Each step I took seemed to reinforce a premonition that this day I would come face to face with my maker.

'Stupid', I thought. *'I'm being stupid'*. But I could not shake off my strange disquiet.

Over to our left came the slow, interrupted, liquid, popping and bubbling emission of an elephant's prolonged wet fart. We all came to an abrupt halt. I looked over my shoulder at the trackers. They grinned sheepishly. The rich grain supper of the night before had obviously loosened the elephant's bowels. The strange noise was followed by the dull thumping sounds of giant turds hitting the ground.

I looked at Mbuyotsi. I pointed in the direction of the sounds and held up one finger. I was pleased that isolated animal had betrayed its separate whereabouts before the fireworks began.

A careful analysis of the sounds coming from the bushes to the front of us told me there were at least three animals directly ahead. I presented three fingers to the trackers and pointed ahead. Mbuyotsi nodded. He had come to the same conclusion.

Where was the fifth bull? I showed Mbuyotsi my full hand of five fingers and waggled my thumb. He understood my silent question immediately. But he, too, did not know where the fifth bull was. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

I resumed our careful stalk towards the group ahead of us - remembering the location of the single animal in the tangled bushes on our left hand side. I did not eliminate the possibility that the single bull may not be alone. Maybe the fifth bull was with *him?* Maybe not! Nevertheless, three and one only made four. There was still one elephant for which I could not yet account.

I felt the muzzle of Mbuyotsi's rifle poke into my left buttock and I turned to see the tracker holding his finger vertically across his screwed-up lips. Suddenly I realised that all sound within the thicket had ceased. Even the birds were silent.

Dammit, I thought. *They've got our bloody scent.*

I could visualise all five of the elephants standing quite still now, their ears outstretched to catch any sound that we might make, their trunks probing the air to detect our human odour.

I cursed myself for being so unobservant. I had been completely switched off by the spectre of my niggling fear. *That'll teach me,* I thought. *I must concentrate on the task in hand.*

"Ssssss," Mbuyotsi attracted my attention again. I turned again towards him. He shook his head disapprovingly. Then, with his eyebrows extended upwards, he made a gesture to our front pointing forward with a thrust of his chin.

There, not fifty yards away, were the upper portions of three elephants' trunks protruding above the thicket canopy their prehensile fingers flaringly open like the probing mouths of trumpets. The animals were facing us and the sensitive tips of their trunks were casting about, first to the left then to the right. There was no doubt at all now that the elephants had picked up our scent.

'Damn', I said to myself. *'Damn. Damn. Damn'*. At the same time I felt a sense of relief flood over me. The confrontation had begun. The ice had been broken. Now, hopefully, the elephants would take to their heels and I would not have to face them in this impossible and suicidal situation. Perhaps, on the follow up, we might catch them with their pants down in easier country. The long, hot and arduous hours of tracking a herd of alert elephant bulls was something I had learnt to hate but, on this occasion, I contemplated the proposition of our quarry's possible flight with some considerable satisfaction.

'Tracking the bastards all afternoon will be far preferable to confronting them in this thick shit,' I thought.

But the danger was not yet over. The elephants were still standing there in front of us. They had not *yet* run away. And now they were alert. The tension was electric. I could feel a hard stool in my rectum being moved up and down inside my body by the nervous peristaltic contractions of my bowels.

We froze. I was, at that moment, very conscious of the fact that it was not unusual for angry bull elephants to charge pestering hunters, unseen, by running them down along the track of their scent. Indeed, it had happened to me many times before - and under the circumstances of our location deep within the heavy thicket all three of us knew it

would do us no good to run from such a frightening encounter. We would simply have to stand and face it. We also knew that the inconsistent wind was just as much an impediment to the elephants, with respect *to them* locating our position, as it was to ourselves with respect *to us* being able to approach the elephants without detection.

The elephants knew we were in the thicket now but they did not know where. The fickle wind was wafting one way and then the other taking our pungent human scent in many different directions at the same time. All three of us knew this instinctively. We also knew that any sound we made now would most surely betray our position - and that that too might provoke an aggressive charge.

The hunted had become the hunters.

We had no option now but to remain absolutely still, to hold our breath, and to maintain a consummate silence. At the same time I prepared myself, mentally, to stand my ground and to face a determined charge should such be the outcome.

My nerves began to play tricks on me and my body began shaking with the strain of the agonising tension. My fear was enhanced by the intimidating spell these elephants had so strangely cast upon me. A vision of the crumpled remains of the old Tonga headman flashed again before my eyes.

My mind, also, began to play tricks. Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, I switched off to our perilous predicament. In a momentary flash an incongruous thought burst into my brain – '*This is like submarine warfare'. I* recalled a war film I had once seen in which a German submarine had been detected by British Royal Navy surface vessels that were dropping depth-charges into the sea to rupture the U-boat's hull. The submarine had descended to the ocean floor and it had lain doggo on the sand. Complete silence then had been the submariners' only means of defence.

No sooner had I invented these thoughts, however, than my intrinsic survival mechanisms jolted me back to reality. The danger was here. It was very real and it was all around us.

When the charge came - *if* the charge came - I knew it would be a terrifying experience and I forcefully steeled my nerves to accept the possibility.

There would be no screaming or trumpeting from the angry bulls. There would just be the *unseen* terror of frightening crashing sounds, the crack of splintering wood, and the vision of tall shuddering bushes as the huge animals ploughed their way through the thicket towards us. The elephants would be like tanks racing through a flimsy wheat field in their fanatical determination to reach and to annihilate their enemy. I knew I would then have to face the prospect, an instant before impact, of the broad flat forehead of a rampaging bull bursting through the foliage literally feet in front of my face.

I would have a fraction of a second to place but a single bullet into the lead animal's brain. And even if I killed it instantly there was still the danger of the elephant's dead body careering over me. Its enormous momentum would continue to propel the six ton carcass forward until all its kinetic energy was expended. To avoid such a fate I would have only one choice - to be nimble, to be quick, and to jump to one side the instant I pulled the trigger.

Under the circumstances of such a charge there would be no chance for a second shot. The enormity of our situation, however, was compounded by the fact that there was not just one elephant, there were five. And the prospect of being confronted by a phalanx of all five bulls bearing down on me at the same time filled me with a sudden and foreboding dread.

At the thought, all my sweat glands suddenly opened wide. Instantly and uncontrollably the perspiration began to stream off my body. I repeatedly wiped the wetness from my brow and the stink of my own

fear did nothing to alleviate my state of quailing funk. I had an overpowering desire to run.

Nevertheless, although my taut nerves were strung to breaking point, I could not let my trackers down. Like them, I stoically held my ground. I retained enough control, and had enough common sense, to understand that I had no other option. If my nerve broke now, and I did run, I would provide the elephants with all the direction they needed. They would charge at the sound of my departure - and it would then all be over in a matter of seconds.

After what seemed an eternity but which, in reality, was probably no more than one or two minutes, the elevated trunks disappeared from above the bushes and a deep throated growl filtered through the thicket. This was followed by the hollow rasping sound of an elephant's ears being slowly scraped through the rigid stems of the thicket undergrowth. And there was the sound of sticks being broken underfoot.

The elephants' nerves had broken first. They were on the move.

Mbuyotsi was the first to come to his senses - quickly realising that we now had the advantage.

"Hamba!" *Go!* He urged me quietly from behind.

I set off quietly but determinedly in silent pursuit of the retreating animals. My two trackers followed on, now much more eagerly, behind.

The spell had been broken and such is the volatility of a hunter's passions during these mercurial periods of danger, my nerves *instantly* returned to a state of equilibrium. My brain began to function purposefully and constructively once again - and I reasoned that, once in flight, the big bulls would be unlikely to change their minds. They would not now press home a determined attack. Certainly, we would

be safe now from a *vindictive* assault.

The sounds the elephants made were, at first, almost imperceptible. Their initial retreat was gentle and hesitant. During the first few minutes of their departure they walked very slowly through the thicket dragging their huge sails softly through the heavy brush - briefly stopping to listen - then moving on again. All the while probing the wind with their elevated trunks for confirmation of our presence.

The previous night's experience was still at the forefront of the elephants' consciences and their nerves were keenly on edge. Finally, therefore, when the strong and dreaded scent of the hunters behind them again reached their delicate nostrils, the elephants panicked. And they bolted in a frantic and terrified bid to escape the ominous danger.

At first the trackers and I matched the timing of our movements to the sounds of the elephants' deliberate retreat. We moved hesitantly in tune with the same cautious progress of our quarry - using every noise made by the animals in their diffident flight to mask the sounds of our own advance. But when the elephants broke into a run I instantly followed suit.

At a flat run I quickly reached the raceway of broken trampled bushes left by the running elephants. The trackers were right on my heels. We found ourselves amongst a choking pall of heavy dust kicked up by the runaway animals from the dry sand beneath the damp top layer. We did not hesitate. Racing after our fleeing quarry we turned and twisted and ducked through and under the dense and distorted bushes as we strove with all our might to catch up.

The elephants were now well and truly on the run. The tables were turned once more in our favour. The hunters were again the hunters, and the elephants were again the quarry.

Not far ahead I knew the thicket would end and that the elephants would be confronted with the open and steep scarp at the end of the

gully. I knew, too, that no elephant had the ability to climb steep hillsides quickly. I was confident, therefore, that none of the killer elephants would get away once they started to scale that slope. So I determined to place myself as quickly as possible in the most advantageous position to take them out as they struggled to climb the hill - to kill them one and all.

In the event, however, things did not work out that way.

The five elephant bulls burst out of the thicket edge one after the other and seeing the steep slope rising up in front of them, they suddenly realised that they were trapped. They, too, knew their physical shortcomings and they were not about to place themselves in the predicament that was, at that very moment, running through my mind.

For a brief few seconds the five big bulls milled about in the open - hesitant. Then, in unison, they turned and plunged back into the thicket and, in a total blind panic they frantically hurled themselves through the deep cover once again. In the elephants' minds there was now no thought of confronting the hunters - no thought of attack. All they wanted to do was to get through the dense cover as quickly as possible, to get out the other side, and to escape onto the downward facing slope of the Ruziruhuru river bank. And to run . . . run. . . run. . . run.

When the elephants broke back into the thicket my trackers and I were racing pell mell along the dust-filled broken swathe of bush left by our fleeing quarry. We did not, therefore, hear the roaring, crashing sounds of the advancing bulls as the five animals surged back along the path of their recent flight. It was with total and utter surprise, therefore, that I suddenly saw the head of the first big bull erupt through the bushes right in front of me.

It was by sheer arrant chance that at that particular place the elephants, in their outward flight, had flattened a short channel of

bush. This gave me the opportunity to slide to a halt, to flick off the safety catch of my rifle, and to drop the outline of its foresight onto the leading animal's brain. The bouncing heads of two other elephants came into view immediately behind the lead animal.

My bullet ripped through the skull of the first bull. It crashed to the ground in full flight right in front of me, its eyes staring vacantly into eternity. The next elephant swerved past its fallen comrade and bore down on me fast. Its eyes focused on me and its head began to drop.

I frantically worked the bolt of my rifle.

Mbuyotsi's little 9.3 mm barked in my ear, the muzzle blast sending a blinding flash of pain deep into my skull. The elephant did not fall down. Instead, it screwed up its eyes, lifted its head high, and without missing a beat raced on towards me.

I rammed a new round into the breech but the elephant was on top of me before I could bring the rifle to bear. I only had time enough to point the weapon at the elephant's face and blast the heavy slug into the big bull's head. At that exact moment the elephant's trunk crashed into me and I went flying backwards through the air.

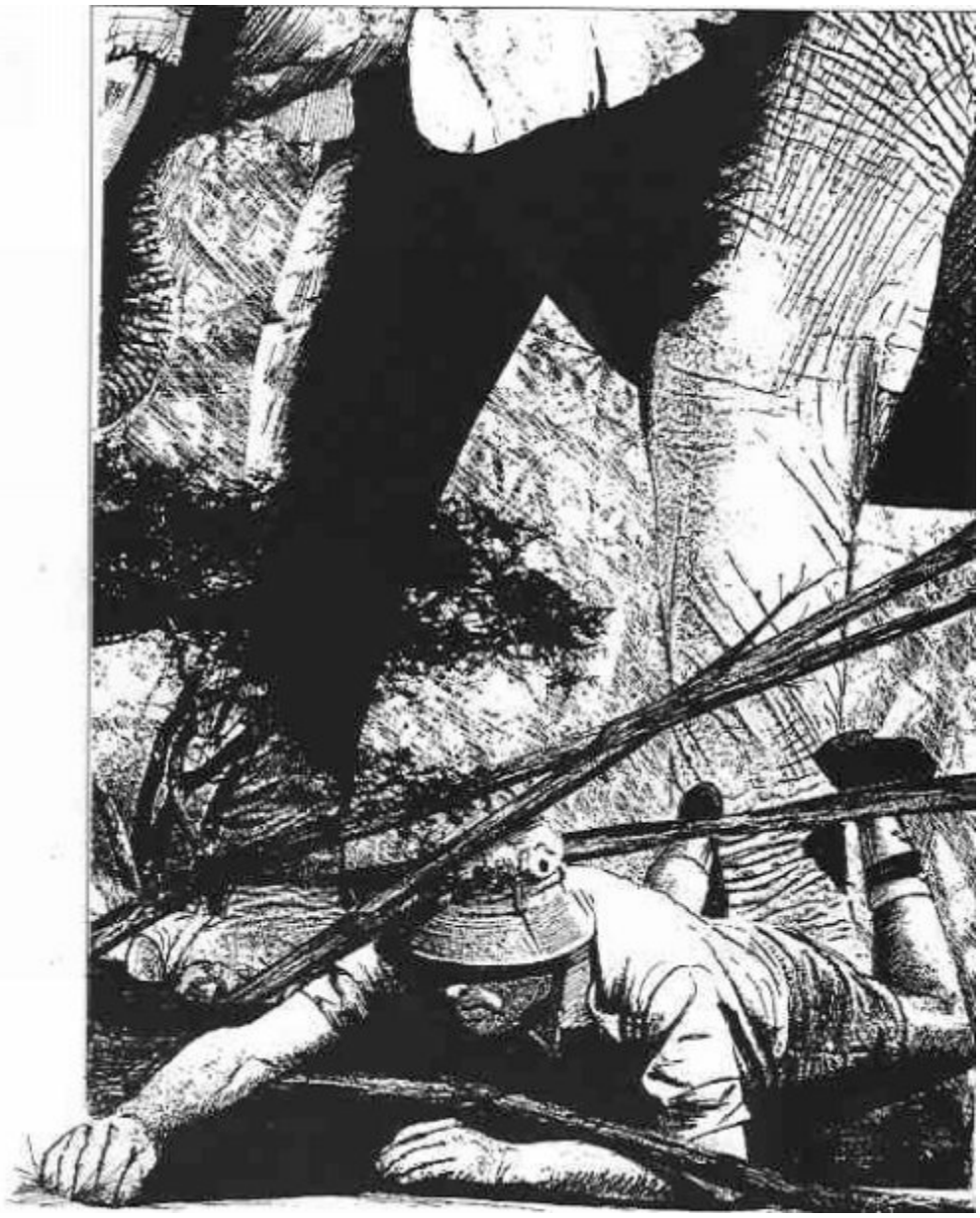
I hit the ground on my back with a heavy thump and the wind was knocked out of my lungs. Bright flashes of light popped and sparkled and flickered in front of my eyes. An excruciating pain penetrated to my brain through my left ear. My mind was in turmoil. I could not breathe. My chest was static.

The next thing I knew was that I was beneath the huge mass of an angry dark leviathan, its monstrous feet crashing into the ground mere inches from my face. The animal's back legs kicked me forward and I heard the cracking snap of ribs breaking. I was terrified and weakly tumbled about trying to avoid further injury. But I was impotent in the face of such gigantic strength - and my inability to breathe brought me to a state of virtual paralysis.

Then I was no longer staring at the under surface of the mammoth belly and, in a totally bemused state, I realised that my rifle was not in my hands. I felt naked and vulnerable without it. I sat up - frantically searching for the weapon on the ground around me. My mind was in a state of confused bewilderment, and it was racked with a rampaging terror.

'Where the hell was my rifle?'

My most urgent need very rapidly became the physical demand of my body to recover my breath. My chest was paralysed. No breaths either entered or left my mouth.



Meanwhile pandemonium reigned all about me. Even as I searched for my rifle, and helplessly fought to regain my lost breath, I was vaguely conscious of the colossal grey bodies of three panic stricken titans passing close by on either side. They disappeared somewhere into the green jungle behind me. And all the while, over my shoulder, I was subconsciously aware of the immense rump of a big bull elephant still towering over me. I was dimly appreciative of the fact that the animal must be the one that both Mbuyotsi and I had wounded.

In my befuddlement I wondered why the elephant had not run away with the others. A charging bull elephant, hit squarely in the face with a heavy calibre bullet but not killed, normally shuts its eyes and runs on. In my confused state I was not cognizant of the fact that my last bullet had passed so close to the animal's brain it was severely stunned. Like myself the elephant, too, was completely disorientated.

The elephant's huge feet were shuffling about mere inches from my back. And although I was not aware of this fact at the time, the stricken punch-drunk animal was balancing itself, precariously, on shaky spread-eagled front legs. It thrashed about, staggering, and churned up the soft sandy soil with its feet in the same unchanging spot. Deep sonorous growls issued from the animal's throat and it shook its giant head vigorously from side to side. I could hear the flat reverberative sound of its plank-like ears as the animal beat them, with anger and confusion, against its shoulders.

I was subconsciously aware of the danger of being trampled and, instinctively, tried to roll away to avoid the elephant's great shuffling feet - but the rigid stems of the thicket bushes all about me were too constraining.

My eyesight began to blur and my senses to fade. I no longer felt the close proximity of the big elephant and the very real danger of its gigantic bulk so close alongside me became of no consequence. Paramount in my mind became the all-consuming need to regain my

breath but it would not come. My ribcage remained totally inactive and a feeling of abject terror overwhelmed me.

‘*I'm going to die’*, the frantic thought flashed through my mind. ‘*I'm going to die!*’ I subsided into a state of dark unconsciousness, and I toppled sideways onto the sand.

Somewhere in the distant recesses of my mind I heard an elephant trumpeting. Then it was screaming. The shrieking implodents were vibrant and very close at hand, but the significance of that fact did not register in my torpid brain.

Then there was a loud shattering report. THAT acutely jolted my brain and it retrieved a degree of my lost sensibilities from the twilight world to which they had descended. There was another sharp bang. This time my body flinched with unconscious reaction. And then, in the leaden vitals of my foggy mind, I became aware of the elephant's monstrous body crashing to the ground. Something struck me hard in the back sending a sharp stab of pain from smashed ribs through my body. Suddenly I was being jostled, violently and rhythmically, by a strange and powerful force that I was unable to resist.

All at once the first breath came. It arrived abruptly and unexpectedly and with a harsh and searing sob. My whole body shuddered and there was a devastating pain deep within my chest as my crippled and rigid diaphragm suddenly relaxed. At last my lungs began to expand. And with each new intake of air more and more fresh oxygen was absorbed into my bloodstream. Slowly my hovering state of semi-consciousness began to recede.

I was still being jostled violently when my eyes began to refocus. Gradually the realisation came to me that I was lying with my head pressed tightly up against the lower rear limb of a recumbent elephant's body. The rhythmic shaking motion was caused by the spasmodic kicking of the animal's back legs - and, looking up, I could see the granulated and cracked heel of the elephant's giant back foot

beating a repetitive tattoo in the air mere inches above my face. I could hear the liquid sound of the animal's hip joint as it flexed with each violent and convulsive action.

Reorientation flooded back with the shock appreciation of my perilous predicament. I tried, feebly, to extricate my powerless and exhausted body from its precarious position beneath the elephant.

Mbuyotsi pulled me free. He took me by the ankles and dragged me unceremoniously away from the elephant's huge carcass. Behind Mbuyotsi I could see Ben standing with my .458 Magnum in his one hand and Mbuyotsi's 9.3 Mauser in the other. There was a frantic worried look on Ben's face.

Two of the killer elephants were dead. The other three had run away - and we were all still alive and now quite safe. My chest was sore, my ribcage ached, the whole left side of my head was numb and the sounds that my left ear absorbed were dull and muted.

My right ear was quite sound, however, and I could hear the shrill whistles of the Ba-Tonga water bag carriers in the faraway distance. They were trying to make contact with the hunting party.

The hunt was over. We had been very lucky.

Walking the 15 miles (24 kilometres) back to the Land Rover that evening - and well into the night - was purgatory. I had three broken ribs. My inner and frontal thigh, lower stomach and lower ribs on the right hand side were all black and blue from that one smack of the elephant’s trunk. And my brain was largely concussed from the muzzle blast of Mbuyotsi’s 9.3 mm Mauser in my ear. I would not have been able to make that long walk back to the Land Rover had not my two Bushman trackers frog-marched me most of the way.

Hunting the Ruziruhuru killer bulls that day was a hunt that I will never forget!