

*A Hunter's Tales ...*

*A Hunter's Trails*



**Ron Thomson**

*Volume 1*

# **A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails**

## **Volume 1**

**By Ron Thomson**

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

## Hunting the Korodziba elephant bull

This hunt took place in 1961 in the extensive teak forests of the Tjolotjo district. These forests lie just outside the south-eastern boundary of Hwange National Park in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The Rhodesian Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management had ascertained there were too many elephants and buffaloes in the game reserve at that time, so we were shooting all those that wandered across the national park boundary. The objective was to reduce the national park's elephant and buffalo numbers without having to institute culling operations inside the national park. In those days no elephant culling, anywhere in Africa, had ever taken place.

Our target was to reduce elephant numbers by 1 000 animals; and to eliminate every buffalo that we could find. The meat from such animals - because they were shot outside the national park - was made available, free of charge, to the local Ndebele villagers. That was the *good* spin-off from this exercise because the general diet of Africa's rural people is always short in protein.

I was then a 21 year old government employed game ranger and I had been hunting elephants for the department, on my own, for less than six months. At that time I had killed between 30 and 50 elephants, so I was at the very bottom of a very long big-game-hunting learning curve. Fifty elephants may seem a lot to a modern tyro sports hunter but it was minuscule compared to the numbers that I was to hunt over the next two decades.

I had been killing elephant's cleanly with side-on head shots for some months. This required that I position myself correctly when approaching an elephant that was unaware of my presence - or that I waited for an elephant to turn its head sideways on to me before taking my shot. Neither of these situations was ideal and it frequently, and often seriously, compromised my hunting circumstances.

Really big elephant bulls have enormous heads - fully five feet in cube; and within that enormous mass of bone and tissue is located a brain (very much

off-centre) that is no bigger than the head of an average man without his bottom jaw. I had had to investigate and to learn, that the brain is located just forward of, and dead centre between, the elephant's ear holes - which are located at the back edge of the skull.

Even with this knowledge, however, when an elephant charges you, you cannot see the ear holes! Furthermore, depending on the position of the attacking elephant's head - high or low - the site where you have to place your bullet, in order for it to hit the brain, can be anywhere along a six foot vertical line running the full length of the elephant's face.

At the time of *this* hunt, I still had not properly worked out how to *visualise* an elephant's brain from the front.

I had recently sawed a dry elephant skull in half in order to better understand the brain's location in relation to the dominant skeletal features on the head - particularly its prominent cheekbones and the ear holes. And I had scrutinised hundreds of living bull elephants - on the tourist routes inside the park - trying to generate in my mind a formula that would enable me *see* the brain from the front.

I recognised my serious deficiency in this matter; and I understood that it was a critically important weak point in my rapidly developing big game hunting skills. It was, indeed, vital that I achieve complete comprehension because, sooner or later, I was going to be presented with a charging bull elephant that really meant business.

**THIS IS THAT STORY.**

At 7 o'clock that morning we picked up the fresh tracks of a gigantic bull elephant on the Sehumi drainage. The Sehumi is a dry, fossil river system which represents the (then) unfenced eastern boundary of the national park. We followed the elephant into the teak forest, moving east. My two Bushman trackers, Ben and Mbuyotsi, after looking upon its huge footprints, commented that this elephant was very big. It was not normal for them to make such an observation. To them an elephant was an elephant!

The wind was every which-way that day and, towards midday, the elephant picked up our scent and ran away. It smelt us again shortly after that - and it ran away again. We were persistent, however, flushing it three more times in the next two-hours. On each occasion the elephant took to its heels, it seemed a little bit more reluctant to flee, and considerably more agitated than it had previously been. Undaunted, we continued to follow the tracks.

*We game ranger hunters constantly used an ash bag when hunting dangerous game - to determine the direction of the wind. The traditional ash bag is a small and porous linen tobacco pouch which, every morning, the trackers re-filled with fresh white wood-ash from our previous night's campfire.*

*When held at arm's length, and tweaked with a shake of the wrist, the little bag exudes a small white cloud of ash which is carried away for some distance on the air currents that surrounded us. This rendered the invisible movement of the air visible; it told us in which direction our own scent was travelling; and, if the animal we were pursuing was consistently moving with the wind, it told us the animal knew we were following it. Hunted animals often run with the wind in order to pick up the pursuer's scent long before they hear or see him. This gives the animal a survival advantage.*

*The ash bag also enables the final stalk of the hunt to be executed from a fully downwind position. An ash bag, therefore, was a vital part of our equipment.*

Following an elephant's spoor across the deep Kalahari sand of the Tjolutjo teak forests is not difficult. The sand is fine, loose and very deep. Even a

dung beetle leaves footprint impressions.

Easy or not, however, it is not just the hunter's ability to *follow* an elephant's footprints that is important. There is a lot more to good tracking than that. The tracks - a.k.a. *sign* or *spoor* - tell us many things: *where* and *how* the elephant had moved, and *when* it had passed by that way. Indeed, the hunter's and the tracker's interpretation of what *else* the tracks told them was critical to the hunt.

The manner of the tracks also conveys to the hunter and his tracker the elephant's fluctuating behaviour patterns; and it reflects the animal's often very changeable temperaments. *That* is where my Bushman trackers were indispensable. They were

the world's experts at deciphering all the *other* messages that elephant spoor has to offer.

After the elephant's fifth flushing, I got the distinct *feeling* that it was getting annoyed. I don't know what made me think that. Maybe it was something in the nature of the tracks? Maybe it was something I had picked up subconsciously from the anger or fear pheromones it had been exuding? Maybe it was just me getting jittery? It was, in fact, my hunter's *sixth sense* kicking in - but I knew nothing about that subject at the time. I was truly - then - very much a rookie!

After the elephant's second flushing, the wily old bull had started moving consistently with the wind. That told me it had worked out we were in serious pursuit. I knew then that this elephant had been hunted before!

The elephant took us many miles from the game reserve's Sehumu boundary. At one stage it walked right past a small Ndebele settlement called Korodziba. From where we were following the spoor, I could see the villagers walking about amongst their pole-and-dagga (pole-and-mud walled) thatched huts.

*"Basop loh mcobidagga,"* Ben warned me after the last flushing. *Look out for this elephant!* He, too, had felt what I had sensed. This elephant was getting angry.

Understanding that Ben, my chief tracker, had picked up exactly the same vibes as I had done was uncanny. It brought fear to my soul. I had not felt so

intimidated when hunting elephants for a very long time.

Maybe I was scared because this was an exceptionally large bull; and because I suddenly understood that, for the task at hand that day - if the elephant *should* seriously attack me - I really had insufficient experience to deal with it. I had shot enough elephants to be competent - as a novice *first* starts to feel confident - but I also knew that I still had an awful lot to learn. And there was that nagging knowledge that I had not yet mastered the vital frontal brain shot.

We tracked on. Trudging through the heavy sand I thought about what Ben had said. I had to smile. He had called the elephant *mcobidagga*. That was the Bushmen's nickname for an elephant. The 'c' is pronounced with a soft clicking lisp. It means: *The one who pummels mud*.

I took Ben at his word, however, and prepared myself for a determined charge. The tracker had been carrying my government-issue .375 Magnum all morning. I now took it off his shoulder, checked that there were four rounds in the magazine and one up the spout, and I clicked the safety catch back on. If there was the possibility of a charge I was going to be ready for it.

An hour later it happened.

We had entered a part of the *gusu* (teak forest) where there were a lot of tall teak trees and intermittent patches of particularly thick *sinanga* (impenetrable understory thicket).

*Sinanga comprises a mixture of understory plants up to 15 feet high: coppices of heavily leafed teak saplings; sprawling creeper-like hook-thorn vines; and infusions of dense sicklebos - Chinese lantern bushes - with their profusion of two-inch-long black spines, sharp as needles, sticking out everywhere. And above it all spread the high top canopies of enormous teak trees.*

Sinanga, therefore, is not the best of places in which to hunt Africa's dangerous big game animals!

The elephant had been moving at a very fast pace since its last flushing. Not running but walking, purposefully, with very long strides. I was beginning to think it was on its way to the horizon and that we would now never catch up

with it. I had followed this kind of spoor many times. It had always ended up with the elephant outpacing us. Hunting very big elephant bulls can become very tiring and equally frustrating.

Then, to our right front - from the middle of a dense pocket of sinanga - there came the sudden loud, cracking sound of a single dry stick snapping. It was a single syllable - like the sound you make with your tongue when you *click* it loudly off your pallet.

We all stopped dead. I slipped the safety catch off and held my rifle at the ready. Adrenaline began to pump. This was not going to be another mundane hunt. This was going to be something very special. I could feel it in my bones; and I hoped I would measure up to it.

Then suddenly, with great apprehension, I realised the matter had really been taken out of my hands. The elephant was actually now in command!

My body began to quiver. The palms of my hands became wet with a sudden sweat. Fear gripped at my bowels. One after the other I wiped the palms of my hands on the fronts of my short khaki trousers. It didn't help. Almost immediately they became wet again.

That breaking stick could only mean one thing. The elephant we had been following all day long was standing in the sinanga diagonally in front of us. It had gone to ground. And less than 30 paces separated us.

In my mind's eye I could see what had happened. The elephant had ploughed into the sinanga and, seeing the heavy cover for what it was - a good ambush position - had precipitously stopped dead in its flight. There it had remained, hidden from view, very still - probably for a very long time - listening along its back trail for sounds of pursuit. That is what harassed elephants do!

When the sound of our shuffling footsteps through the carpet of dry leaves under foot had confirmed our approach, it had turned to face us. And in the turning, its foot had inadvertently trodden on a dead stick concealed beneath the leaf litter. It was that single, loud, sharp *SNAP* that had betrayed its presence.

I visualised the elephant now, standing amidst its impenetrable hideaway - silent - unmoving - its ears held flat against its shoulders - absorbing the reality of our nearby presence. It would now be facing us head on.

I was in no doubt that the big elephant bull had made up its mind to attack us. It had had enough of being pushed from pillar to post. We had never let up on our relentless pursuit. The harassment - the provocation - had been just too much. Attack was now the desperate elephant's only means of defence. It *needed* to retaliate.

The fact that, this time, the wily old bull had not run off, told all three of us that it had been waiting for us to catch up. And *that* meant *trouble*.

It had chosen its place of ambush well. We, the hunters, were positioned in a patch of relatively open forest. The elephant was standing not far off in some of the densest sinanga I had seen that morning. I looked into it very carefully but could see no sign of our quarry.

Had the elephant not exposed itself by standing on that dead stick we would have probably followed its tracks into the sinanga and walked right onto it. The confrontation, then, would have been *very* close; and all the cards would have been stacked in the elephant's favour. But the elephant *had* stood on that stick! Lucky for us!

Silence reigned. I could smell my fear. None of us moved.

My heart was pumping ten to the dozen. I had never before been *properly* charged down by an elephant. Seriously challenged? Yes! Many times! They had all been mock charges, however, conducted by pubertal and young adult bulls. Sometimes by cows! When the blustering elephants had realised that I was standing my ground, however, their vociferous protests had petered out.

This time the animal confronting us was a very large mature bull. I sensed that this one was going to prove the exception to the rule.

As all these thoughts ran through my mind, I developed a sudden urge to turn and to run. I had not experienced such a feeling of desperation for a very long time. I was seriously afraid! And I began to believe that I had bitten off more than I could chew.

Nevertheless, I grabbed at my wavering nerves and pulled them in tight. And I stood my ground.

Ben was within touching distance on my right hand side. He had the usual

box of spare ammunition in his left hand; and there were two shiny brass cartridges in the fingers of his right hand, ready to feed to me quickly should I need them. I looked at him. He looked at me. His eyes looked worried. His face was bland - serious and non-committal.

Without moving my feet I twisted round and looked at Mbuyotsi. His face was without expression - showing *his* strain. I looked at the rifle in his hands. It was a 9.3 mm Mauser - a peashooter compared to what we really needed. I would have been much happier had I had a ship's cannon in my hands. I doubted that even my .375 Magnum was big enough.

I turned to the front and looked towards where I knew the elephant was waiting. We all knew that it, too, was standing very still and listening. It had heard us. Of that there was no doubt. It had our position pegged. None of us doubted that either. It knew exactly what and where we were.

So why was it waiting? If it was going to attack why did it not just charge us down? Maybe it was waiting for us to walk right onto it? Maybe...??? All sorts of strange thoughts began rushing round and round inside my head. Many were nonsensical! They were all manifestations of my deep-seated self-doubts!

One minute passed. Nothing happened. Two more came and went. Denial inveigled its way into my sub-conscience. I was beginning to doubt that we had heard an elephant at all. But deep down inside my heart I knew it was there. What else could have snapped a dead stick like that? The big elephant bull was there all right! And I *knew* that at that very moment it was standing very still; that it was listening; and that it was evaluating its situation - just as we were.

The elephant needed a cue - a signal - to set it off. But what would it do? Would it charge or would it turn and again run away? It was anybody's guess.

Strangely, I prayed that it would run away. I knew it was a very big bull. I also knew that my .375 Magnum did not pack enough punch to knock down an elephant this big if I missed the brain. If it charged I would have to kill it or face the consequences - consequences that were just too terrible to contemplate. I was very nervous of *this* elephant.

And - if the elephant charged - I had serious doubts about my ability to kill it with a frontal brain shot. That was the worse omen of all because, if the elephant *did* charge, a frontal brain shot would be my only option.

***The next episode, from start to finish, took less than ten seconds.***

I heard the sound of dead leaves shuffling. It came from where we suspected the elephant was standing. Another stick broke. Then another! Suddenly there was the sound of an elephant's big body pushing ever more urgently through the sinanga –

and of stiff sticks dragging across an elephant's thick hide. The noise of movement gathered momentum. The elephant was on its way; and it was coming directly towards us.

It had begun its attack.

For a brief moment panic punched into my system. A switch had been flicked. My heart was in my mouth, beating like a six-stamp hammer mill. My body began to quake. The hands on my rifle were alive, shivering madly. All the nerve ends in my body were on fire. My imagination ran riot.

I stood my ground.

A central place in the sinanga began to shake. Inside the disturbance I saw a dark grey shape moving. The elephant was coming towards me, gathering speed with every second. Then I saw its ears - bouncing up and down in unison with its pounding, long-striding, front feet - and the features of its head and face took shape.

My eyes opened wide. This elephant was huge. Its enormous size was incredibly intimidating. I could not remember having ever seen an elephant quite so big.

It had its head up high. Its two big, thick tusks were thrust upwards and forwards. They glistened whitely in the sunlight. It was looking ahead, down its nose, for a visual contact. It knew *where* we were but that was not good enough. To direct the final stage of its attack, it had to actually see us.

It was a most terrifying moment.

I kept grabbing at my shaking nerves, pulling them under ever more strict

mental control. The power of the brain is amazing under such circumstances!

The danger was upon us - upon me! The giant elephant was already almost on top of me. The waiting was past. My biggest ever *moment-of-truth* had arrived. In the next few seconds the elephant was going to die - or I was going to die....

The instant that idea flashed into my head my mind took command of my body. Gone was the rising panic. Gone were the quaking nerves. Suddenly my hands were quiet and steady on the rifle. There was still a tingling sensation deep inside my gut, but it had no effect on my actions or my confidence. I was completely back in control.

Calmly I lifted my rifle to my shoulder. It came up slowly - as I always remember things happening when real danger threatens. My recollection of what occurred next was that everything was happening in extreme slow motion. Even the speed of the elephant's inexorable charge slowed right down. My eyes sought out the rifle's sights and I placed them on the elephant's face. I looked for the cheekbones and found them - easily - as the huge bull drew ever closer.

I recalled the dry elephant skull I had, just a few weeks previously, sawed in half. I visualised the small brain cavity exposed - small that is, compared to the massive proportions of the skull. And I recalled the position of the prominent cheekbones relative to the position of the brain. It was those cheekbones that could tell me where the ear holes lay - because the ear holes can't be seen when an elephant charges you head on. And I remembered with total clarity, that when I had rammed a steel rod through the ear holes - from one to the other - in the re-assembled skull, it had passed right through the rear lobes of the brain. Accurately visualising the location of the ear holes, therefore, by using the cheekbones as my guide, was the key to me killing this giant elephant.

I remembered the ditty I had concocted to locate the position of the elephant's ear holes from the front; and so to see the brain sitting in that gigantic head. I sang the words in my mind:

*The thickness of the cheekbones  
- above the cheekbones -*

*at the back of the cheekbones'*

THAT was where the ear holes lay. I drew an imaginary line between the invisible ear holes - and snap-judged the middle point. Middle-for-diddle! That was where the brain was located.

The elephant closed the gap. It uttered not a sound. There was no trumpeting. There was no growling. There was no angry *chuntering*! Nothing! There was just the aura of complete silence.

Even the sound of the elephant's great body surging through the sinanga was inaudible to me. My mind was focussed entirely on the elephant's visual presence - on its brain. And every one of my other senses that was not important to my immediate survival, disengaged.

*This* elephant was not trying to intimidate me. *This* charge was no demonstration. The big bull had trimmed all its sails - just as I was doing. It was using only those of its faculties that were needed for the job in hand. The elephant's whole being was concentrating on its attack. It was coming at me full bore. Its ears were flat against its shoulders and its trunk was curled up beneath its head.

As the giant leviathan closed with me, it began to lower its head. I knew then that it had me squarely in its sights.

The closer it got, the lower did its head drop on the hinge of its neck. This prepared it for the expected massive slamming of its forehead and rolled-up trunk into my body.

The position of its brain, relative to the angle of its head, changed all the time as the elephant's head dropped lower and lower. But never once did I lose *sight* of that

vital organ. For the first time in my life I could truly *see* the elephant's brain. It's size - it's shape - everything about it. And it remained firmly between the elephant's invisible ear holes.

My sights unconsciously clawed their way up the elephant's face as its head lowered more and more. They were, all the time, focussed on the brain hidden deep inside the animal's skull.

The elephant's head came right down - almost to ground level - as it prepared to smash into my puny body. And the lower its head descended, the shorter became the distance my bullet had to travel to reach the brain.

The time had come. My sights were on target. I pulled the trigger.

The tiny 300 grained solid bullet hit the elephant fair and square high up on its face. It travelled directly backward through the skull and smashed into the brain.

The toes of the elephant's front feet - instantly - dug deeply into the sand, and its huge body began to fall. But it did not stop its forward flight. It had been running much too fast for that to happen. Its dead body was now flying through the air towards me. Its front feet and legs were pulled backwards - by its toes in the sand - and they folded neatly under the elephant's chest.

The enormous animal hit the sand of the forest floor chest first. Its huge tusks smacked down together like the skids of a sledge in front of it. The momentum of its charge slid the carcass along the ground towards me. It came to rest just three paces from my knees - like a plane landing without its wheels.

I stood very still and watched the elephant's forward-sliding body come to a stop. Only when I saw its big amber eyes, wide open, and staring into eternity, was I certain that it was dead.

And as my brain relaxed my body began to shake.

I turned and looked at Ben - still standing stoically at my side. His eyes were wide open - staring at the dead elephant at our feet. The two brass shells in his right hand were rattling against each other in his shaking fingers. He had been standing next to me - with those two cartridges in his right hand in support - the whole time. Not once had he flinched.

Behind me I heard Mbuyotsi unloading his 9.3 - closing the bolt on an empty chamber. He, too, was a stalwart.

This was my first serious elephant charge. It was a formidable experience.

## **Putting the story-time-frames into perspective.**

To give you some idea what Southern Rhodesia was like in 1955 - when I had my first elephant hunting experience - the following information pertains:

In 1955 Southern Rhodesia, located in the middle of south-central Africa, was a self-governing British colony. The country is 150 333 square miles in extent - 10 percent bigger than Germany. The population, *then*, comprised 176 000 Europeans; 2 290 000 different native peoples; and 13 000 Indians and people of mixed blood.

Most people lived in the towns. The tribal and white commercial farming areas were only sparsely populated. Three-quarters of the country was completely devoid of human habitation, and in its vast and vacant spaces *the bush* was still as wild and as pristine as it had been since the dawn of time.

Only two towns, Salisbury (the capital - now Harare) and Bulawayo - both barely 60 years old in 1955 - dubiously qualified for city status.

Prior to the comparatively recent advent of the white man (1890), the country was the epitome of truly *Savage Africa* - fully deserving of its position as an integral part of what the developed First World then referred to as *The Dark Continent*.

The roads inside only the bigger towns were tarred. Those linking the main centres of business (some of which were just small villages) comprised two strips of tarmac, one strip for each left-and-right pair of vehicle wheels. When on-coming vehicles approached one another, they moved to their respective left-hand sides, each surrendering one strip of tarmac to the other. All other roads throughout the country were dirt.

A rudimentary single-track railway system linked the larger towns only. They were the main trade routes to the outside world.

Mining was a major industry, producing gold, silver, copper, chrome, tin, mica, iron ore, tungsten and coal for export. Other important minerals included lithium, titanium and beryllium. Large quantities of high-grade emeralds were extracted in the south of the country.

The main agricultural crop was Virginia tobacco. Maize, a close second, produced world record yields from locally developed cultivars. High quality beef exports to Europe contributed greatly to the country's economy. The national cattle herd comprised 3 000 000 animals of which two-thirds were owned by the country's native peoples.

The majority of the natives were apolitical. They were then a contented and happy sector of Southern Rhodesian society, occupying native reservations where their agricultural holdings satisfied their living needs. Every family had enough arable

land on which to grow its subsistence crops, and there was adequate grass and browse to feed its cattle, sheep and goats.

The bulk of the country's developments occurred along the relatively narrow central highveld watershed above the 3 000 foot contour. The malaria areas - below 3 000 feet - were largely uninhabited.

The countries of east, south-east and southern Africa were then still recovering from the devastating effect of the 1896 rinderpest pandemic that had decimated both domestic animals and wildlife. Although game was widespread and reasonably plentiful in the mid-1950s, however, it had not yet re-occupied all the available habitats.

Rhodesia was then still, therefore, very much an under-developed pioneer country. Nevertheless, despite this primitive status it was already being referred to as *The Bread Basket of Africa*.

In 1955, Southern Rhodesia was the senior partner in the Central African Federation. Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi) were the other two countries in the coalition.

It was in the wild and remote malarial areas of Southern Rhodesia that I cut my big game hunting teeth.

Most enterprises that achieve greatness had small beginnings. My long and highly successful big game hunting career was one of them.

## Hunting my first leopard

In 1958, at 18 years old, I was employed by a friend of the family, Mike Reynolds, for the purpose of helping him open up some major copper claims he had pegged (and registered) in a very remote part of the Lomagundi district. This was in the far north of the country. Several years later, those claims became The Shamrock Copper Mine.

The location of the claims was two days march to the north of the northernmost farm in the Miami commercial farming area. Our supplies were carried in on the heads of a string of native porters - who became our labour force when we reached the remote site on the Angwa River.

My job was to supervise the labour gang of 20 young black Mashona men who were employed to cut exploratory trenches across the ore body; to supervise the construction of a jeep track out from the claims to the south west; and to hunt game animals to feed everybody on the project.

The job was right up my street.

I spent the mornings carrying out my supervisory work and in the afternoons I went hunting. The countryside was very rugged and there was little game. Bushbuck were the most common antelope with a few klipspringers on the mountain slopes.

In those days I always hunted alone.

The bushbuck were wary and it wasn't long before they became completely switched on to the fact that I was hunting them every afternoon. The cleverer they became the greater the guile I had to use to shoot them. I must have been doing something right, however, because I continued to bring a carcass into camp every third or fourth day. After gutting them in the bush, I was able to carry most of the buck back to camp on my own, over my shoulders.

I saw leopard spoor throughout the gorges but only once did I see a leopard in the flesh; and I only once found one of their kills. I would have loved to take a leopard skin back to my mother on the family farm at Karoi, but I did not have enough time to seek one out; and I had no idea how to go about hunting a leopard anyway. So I put the idea out of my mind.

Within two months I had worked out many of the bushbuck behaviour patterns; and was getting to know where and when I was most likely to find them. In fact, my short sojourn on the Shamrock taught me an awful lot more about hunting than I had ever known before. Nevertheless, it was more my unrelenting efforts, than my hunting skills, which put meat on our table.

Late one afternoon, I was walking down the dry and very steep Nyashire gorge - empty handed - *en route* back to camp. On the spur of the moment, I decided to climb the southern hill slope to a saddle that linked the Nyashire to a much smaller gorge running parallel to it. Across the knife-edge rim of the saddle was a shallow basin of open ground that had been burnt off purposefully by Mike, several months previously, to expose the local rocks for his prospecting inspection. The soils of the burnt-off basin floor were covered in bushbuck spoor and sometimes, in the late evening, they would come out of their heavy thickets to graze on the regenerating green shoots on the burnt grass stubble.

I had learned four things about hunting bushbuck: (1) Always look for them with my nose into the wind; (2) Always move in absolute silence; (3) Always move in ultra slow motion; and (4) Use my ears as much as I did my eyes, to find them. Once I had moulded these four requirements into a workable hunting technique, I began to achieve regular success.

So it was, therefore, that I moved slowly and silently up the open and very loose stony scree that afternoon, making sure not to disturb any pebbles. I moved even slower as I got closer to the razor edge of the mountain saddle. When I was nearly at the top, I lay flat on the ground and wriggled the last several feet up the incline; and then I allowed only the top of my head to insinuate itself slowly above the mountain rim. Down below me lay the green-grass emblazoned basin. I absorbed the scene slowly. Only my eyes moved. There was not one bushbuck in sight.

The last rays of the afternoon sun were beating onto me from the west. It wasn't hot, however, but the light was bright.

There was still half-an-hour of light left in the day. It was good hunting time because that was when the bushbuck came out from their deep cover to feed.

I just had to be patient.

On my left hand side there was a small dry watercourse. It ran diagonally down the slope to the middle of the basin, creating a shallow vee in the topography. And it fetched right down to a much bigger but equally dry riverbed below - 100 yards away to my front.

Near the top of the small gully - not very far away to my left - the channel tumbled over a precipice. It must have made a very pretty waterfall when it rained! When that happened, the water fell 20 feet straight down into a puddle of pebbles at its base. At the time, like every other drainage line in the area, however, the ditch was bone dry. The cliff over which the water fell was wide and curved, forming a horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre.

There were a number of large trees growing inside the waterfall's secluded hollow, together with tall elephant grass and sundry brush, none of which had been burnt. The base of the waterfall enclave, therefore, provided a pocket of heavy cover that was nowhere else available within the basin. I had flushed many a bushbuck from that hidden jewel in the weeks gone by.

All these thoughts passed through my mind as I lay peering over the razor-edge rim of the saddle.

I had learnt to be patient when practicing this kind of still-hunting. I lay there quietly, slowly and gently removing several uncomfortable rocks and sticks that lay beneath my body. And all the while I took my time scanning the scene below.

On the stream bank, at the bottom of the basin, there were three huge ebony trees. Beyond the ebonies, on the other side of the riverbed, there was a heavy thicket of Combretum bushes... a small pocket of the infamous Zambezi jesse!

Bushbuck liked those thickets. They often emerged from them at dawn - also, in the evening, at last light - to feed on the regenerating green grass on the basin floor. The maximum range to any target was 150 yards. I knew, therefore, that if a bushbuck came out onto the open flats any time soon, it would be in our camp larder come nightfall. All I had to do to get one was to wait and watch.

On the Shamrock I hunted with a .22 Hornet. The rifle was an old SMLE .303 that had been re-barrelled and re-chambered for the .22 Hornet cartridge.

For my purpose - for shooting bushbuck and the odd klipspringer - it was an ideal weapon. And it was deadly accurate. It was already loaded with one round up the spout and on safe. I laid the rifle gently on the ground next to me and focussed my attention on the thicket beyond the bottom riverbed. If the bushbuck were going to come out from anywhere, I surmised, they would probably come out of the jesse on the far bank.

There wasn't enough time left in the day to look elsewhere, anyway, so I determined to just lie there and to wait until the light completely failed.

I loved being out alone like this in the evening, so whatever happened I knew I would enjoy the experience.

I had been lying there watching, waiting and listening for perhaps fifteen minutes when I *felt* rather than heard subtle sounds coming from the dry waterfall to my left front. I focussed my attention in that direction and confirmed the soft noises I had detected

They were familiar sounds - yet strange - because they were out of place in that wild environment. What I heard sounded just like a dog gnawing on a bone. I strained my ears. I heard a grunt.

*Bush pigs! There are bush pigs in the thicket at the waterfall!*

A bush pig would do! I imagined, in a flash of frivolity, a cooked bush pig lying on the camp's bush-pole table with an apple in its mouth!

I held my breath and shut my eyes; and I focussed all my senses on the sounds I was hearing. Bush pigs!? No! It sounded more like a dog. But there were no dogs anywhere near the Shamrock.

I sensed a soft growl. It was a pleasurable, contented, insinuation. It was the sound a dog or cat would make when unhurriedly enjoying a meal. It was deeper and much more resonant, however, than the growl of a dog. Then the sudden realisation of what it was raised the hackles on the back of my neck.

*It was a leopard!* It could be nothing else. *There was a leopard in the waterfall thicket feeding on a kill.*

The moment I was sure it was a leopard, the adrenaline began to pump. All over my body my nerves were suddenly aquiver. My hands began to sweat and shake, and all the other familiar symptoms of juvenile buck fever became

immediately manifest. The adrenaline high that ran through my body at that moment was indescribable.

At that stage of my life I had never seen a leopard. Nevertheless, I had read all about how extremely dangerous these big cats can be when wounded. I had read many tales about the terrible mauling that hunters had suffered after they had incautiously approached a leopard they erroneously believed they had killed. And all those thoughts ran rife, round and round inside my head, as I lay there on the brink of the ridge and listened to the minuscule sounds of the leopard feeding. Most were so soft and faint that, had I drawn my focussed attention away from the waterfall, I would not have heard them.

A black-headed oriole flew across the valley and perched on a treetop above where the leopard lay feeding. The bird's exquisite golden breast shone brightly in the sunlight. No sooner had it landed than it gave vent to its strident piping call - totally swamping the gentle sounds the leopard was making.

It didn't matter. I now knew the leopard's whereabouts and, because it did not know mine, I understood implicitly that, at that moment, I held the hunting advantage.

After a while the bird flew away.

Slowly my excitement waned. As the buck fever subsided my mind began to function more constructively. I was very conscious of the fact that the .22 Hornet in my hands was totally unsuitable for leopard hunting - but my tiny bullet was still capable of killing a leopard if it hit a vital organ. There was really very little difference between the size of a leopard's body and that of a bushbuck, and I was killing bushbuck all the time with this same weapon. To kill the leopard, therefore, all I had to do was to place my bullet correctly. The question was: How was I going to get close enough to do *that* without being detected?

The leopard was somewhere below the top rim of the waterfall amphitheatre. I imagined it to be lying on the edge of the dry pebble pool below, or even in it. Wherever it was I would have to approach right to the edge of the rock precipice to see it and shoot it.

The ground between me and the edge of the waterfall was bare brown earth.

It was covered with myriad small rocks and round pebbles, and the heavy stiff stubble of burnt elephant grass.

I pondered the possibilities. There was no way I could reach the edge of the waterfall without the leopard hearing me. I had read somewhere that a leopard's hearing is eight times more acute than that of a man. One false move, one *snick* of a shifted pebble, one *rasp* of a boot on a stiff piece of burnt stubble, and the leopard would be instantly aware of my presence.

Trying to approach the waterfall, therefore, was out of the question!

I could wait and hope the leopard would finish its meal and move out into the open - but deep down in my heart I knew it would still be feeding there come nightfall. I had also read that big cats with full bellies were inclined to lie about their kill site and rest. I knew instinctively, therefore, that my leopard would not emerge from the thicket before it was dark.

The sun disappeared behind a mountain ridge in the west. Time was running out. If I was to kill this leopard I had to make a plan fast. I racked my brain. The vegetation had been burnt bare all around the waterfall. If I could contrive a way to get the leopard to move out of the thicket I would be able to shoot it - as it moved across the open hillside. That was the only solution I could think of. I had to force the animal to move out.

I levered a flat stone out of the soil right in front of my nose. It was the size of the palm of my hand. It would do admirably for what I had in mind. Slowly, quietly, I rose to my feet - leaving my rifle on the ground. I was sure the leopard would not see me from where it was hidden below the waterfall cliff, and I needed to stand up to get the leverage I required to hurl the rock. Gripping the projectile between thumb and forefinger, I sent it flying down the slope in front of me. It travelled like a discus, floating on the air, and it landed about a hundred yards away on some open flat ground.

I had dropped back into my supine position, and was well hidden again, by the time the rock hit the ground. I pulled up my rifle and flipped off the safety catch; and I prepared to fire my shot.

The rock hit the ground with a soft clattering impact. I was disappointed. I had wanted the noise to be louder.

Nothing happened. I listened intently. There were no longer any feeding

noises coming from the thicket. All I could hear was silence. All I could sense was stillness.

I did not know what to expect but I was ready for anything. I imagined the leopard slinking off up the hillside, stopping once to look back. *THAT* would be my best chance. When it stopped to look back! In my mind I just *knew* it would stop. Just once! I waited patiently - worrying. Still nothing happened.

A flock of Natal francolins (pheasants) began their chattering calls in the jesse thicket below me. They were answered by another covey higher up the gorge. A purple-crested loerie churred intermittently from a tangle of creepers in the canopies of the ebonies. A flock of crowned hornbills flew by voicing their piping calls. And there were other, more subtle sounds coming from the bush all around.

These were all messages which indicated everything was quiet and peaceful in the valley below. None of them were alarm calls. They were social calls. I believed that if I could interpret them as being innocuous, so would the leopard. Still nothing happened. Still silence reigned.

I began to think I would have to throw another rock. Maybe I should lob a stone directly into the waterfall thicket itself?

*No! That would not do!* Intuitively, I *knew* that would not do!

Patience! I must have patience. I discarded the idea of a second missile.

One minute led to the next. For a full five minutes there was neither sound nor movement from the waterfall thicket. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the leopard scaled the trunk of one of the big trees inside the amphitheatre.

The impression the leopard's movement left me with, is still very clear in my mind. There was a primary sense of the animal's immense strength. It had moved effortlessly and was full of grace! It had leapt straight up the tall trunk of the tree as though it was running over a flat piece of ground! What impressed me the most was its absolute silence. There was not so much as a whisper of sound. Not one single tearing scratch of a claw. Not even the suspicion of dislodged bark pieces hitting the ground. Nothing! The leopard's leap had been executed with no audible noise whatsoever.

My quarry now stood on a lateral branch looking down into the valley below. Despite all the other homely sounds it was hearing, the leopard had understood one thing. Something quite large had dislodged the stone that I had thrown. It could not afford to ignore the possibility of there being a new prey animal nearby, or a potential source of danger.

The leopard was a big tom. I could clearly see its testicles standing out under its tail. It was perched up there on the branch, broadside on to me and in full view. The white tip of its tail swung gently to and fro. Its head turned first to the left then to the right. It was looking down the valley towards where the stone had landed. *And it was only 50 yards away!*

I was shaking imperceptibly, quivering softly inside, as I brought the iron sights of my rifle to bear on that beautiful body. I set the tip of the front post just behind the leopard's right shoulder and I brought the flat top of the rear U-sight up until it was in line with the tip of the post. The foresight was snug in the rear sight's U. Taking up the first pressure on the trigger I drew in a deep breath. I was very conscious that this was my first, personal and very real adventure into the realm of big game hunting.

Suddenly my body started to shake like a leaf in the wind. My mind was awirl. Doubts there were aplenty. Would my tiny .22 Hornet soft-nose bullet do its job? Was I being irresponsible in attempting to kill a leopard with such a small calibre bullet? None of these doubts really mattered, however, because I knew I was going to do it. I was going to shoot this leopard come hell or high water. It was mine!

Ripples of goose pimples ran up and down my spine. The hairs on my forearms stood up like a hedgehog's quills. And ever so gently I squeezed off the second pressure on the trigger.

The rifle barked. The leopard's body jerked. The big cat turned. It seemed as if it was going to attempt a controlled descent from the tree. Then it lifted its head high and tumbled backwards off its perch; and it disappeared into the brush below.

There followed a most terrifying period of growls and roars that I had ever heard. The animal was clearly in a rage. I could hear its body thrashing about amongst the canes of the elephant grass in the thicket beneath the trees.

Then, just as suddenly as the angry noises had begun, complete silence returned.

I lay on my belly and did not move. I had already ejected the spent shell and had pushed another live round into the chamber. I was ready should the leopard emerge from the thicket and come towards me. I was ready to shoot it again if it ran in any other direction.

I lay as if frozen. I was elated but I did not want to betray my location by either sound or movement.

Only my eyes moved. They canvassed every nook and cranny about the waterfall. My ears were attuned to pick up the slightest vestige of sound, even just a whisper. Nothing! There was not a sound! Not a breath!

Down in the valley below me the francolins were now quiet. The crack of the rifle, and the reverberations of its report up and down the gorges, had long since died away. Its message conveying the hunter's presence had been heard. Every animal and bird within hearing distance of that shot was at that moment, like me, standing, sitting or lying perfectly still - listening.

The minutes trickled by. Silence reigned. My reluctance to move was not only for fear of betraying my whereabouts - to what could be an irate and wounded leopard - but also because I was very deeply afraid.

I thought of slipping down into the Nyashire gorge behind me and making my way back to camp - leaving the leopard to lick its wound, or to die from it if it was not already dead.

There was a shotgun back in camp and two boxes of AAA cartridges. That was a much more appropriate weapon for a leopard than a .22 Hornet. But the sun was by then already long gone.

What to do? Five minutes dragged into ten. As each minute passed, the darkness ever more insidiously impressed itself on the land. Already the whole valley below me was in the deep shadow of the mountains. Soon it would be too dark to see my sights. I did not relish the thought of being on the rim of the valley when total darkness came. If I was going to do anything at all I was going to have to do it soon.

It was with great trepidation that I arose from my super flat position and

stood up on the edge of the valley, sticking out now like a sore thumb. I looked towards the waterfall precipice. My mind was racked with indecision. The minutes continued to drag by one after the other. There was still not a sound from the thicket below. I began to believe the leopard was dead. I hoped and prayed that it *was* dead. I felt confident that my tiny bullet had found its mark. Still, I was afraid to venture any closer to the waterfall.

But I could not stand there, on the edge of the mountain, forever. Steeling my nerves I slowly picked my way over the stony ground moving ever closer to the edge of the waterfall. Each step I took rang loudly in my ears. If the leopard was still alive I knew it would be listening to my every footfall. I could hear my own footsteps even before I made them. Fear clutched at my throat. It threatened to choke me but now I was on my way there was no turning back.

I reached the waterfall and timorously looked down over the top edge of the precipice. There was no movement below. I could see nothing. I could hear nothing. I inched closer, leaning forward, my rifle ready. Down in the pebble-filled bowl beneath me, I saw the carcass of a young bushbuck. I moved closer to the cliff edge and looked down at its white-spotted red coat. I examined it carefully and saw that a large part of it had been eaten.

I looked up at the tree - locating the branch on which the leopard had been standing when I shot it. I looked down to the place where the leopard must have fallen. Down on the ground the grass and the bushes were thick, and the shadows were now very dark. I could see nothing even from my elevated position. There was no dead leopard. There was no live leopard. I still did not know the fate of my unexpected quarry.

There was one consolation. If the leopard *was* still alive it would have great trouble getting to me up the small cliff that separated me from the thicket below. That fact gave me some confidence.

The coming darkness worried me, however, but I did not know what to do. I would have been a fool to venture down into the thicket at that time of day - on my own. Should the now wounded leopard attack me, and should I be badly mauled, there was nobody around to help me. Furthermore, nobody back in camp knew where I was in the labyrinth of gorges that lay behind the copper claims. And I was forever conscious of the fact that I was armed with

only a .22 Hornet.

Discretion proved the greater part of valour. I decided to wait until morning. I would return with a gang of native boys at first light, and with the shotgun in my hands.

And that is what I did. I went back to camp and spent a restless night tossing and turning on my palliasse - on the ground next to the campfire. The following morning I went back to the waterfall with a gang of labourers armed with pick-axe handles. We easily found my dead leopard in the bright light of the early morning. It had clearly been stone dead moments after I had pulled the trigger.

I had shot my first *Big Five* game animal, and my mother was to get her first beautiful leopard skin to drape over the furniture in the lounge of the family farm at Karoi.

The rough bush track we had constructed with dynamite, and with picks and shovels, gave vehicular access to the camp site. That meant Mike could bring in rations for the black staff, by vehicle, every week. My job - as I had expected - had become redundant.

## More leopards at Macaha

It so happened that, just after I left Mike's employ, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) advertised for a field assistant to carry out work similar to what I had been doing on the Shamrock. Hunting for the pot, however, was not part of the contract.

I applied and got the job. My salary was seventy pounds a month. That was more than twice the wage that assistant-tobacco-managers were earning on the farms at that time.

The UKAEA was investigating beryllium deposits in the Mtoko district. The job was trenching ore deposit alluviums and taking hundreds of samples for assay work - to determine their beryllium content. We were much better equipped than we had been on the Shamrock and money seemed to be no object.

I established our tented base-camp in the hills above the long abandoned Good Days Mine at Macaha (pronounced *Ma-khagh-hah*), 80 miles south of the farming village of Mtoko. Macaha is in the northeast of the country right up against the Mozambique border

There, I arranged *mgwaazohs* (specific-sized trenching tasks) for our 30-man-strong labour force each day. Until they settled into the programme, some of the men struggled to complete these tasks. The stronger men managed them with ease.

The men were paid per completed *mgwaazoh*; and they were each required to complete five-and-a-half tasks per week. Theoretically, this gave them every Saturday afternoon and the whole of Sunday *off* - a time to rest and to recuperate before the following week's hard labour.

The men would have preferred to work seven days a week to earn extra money. The head office staff of the UKAEA was emphatic, however, that they had to have one-and-a-half day's complete rest-and-recreation over every weekend.

Some of the really strong men completed two tasks a day. Others managed two tasks in three days; and those who completed extra tasks earned extra

money. But I was still not allowed to work them over weekends.

In time, even the weakest members of the team were able to complete their minimum requirement of five-and-a-half tasks a week, in just five days. The entire black staff then took both Saturday AND Sunday off - during which time they visited the closest tribal villages which were 10 miles away. They walked to the villages on Friday afternoons and they walked back in time for work on Monday mornings.

In the villages the local *mahouris* (whores) prepared themselves for good business every weekend; and the village wives made a lot of money selling meals and home-brewed beer to the *rich* UKAEA labourers. Everybody - including my British head office in Salisbury - was happy with this arrangement.

Consequently, our Macaha camp was deserted every weekend, with the exception of two people from the labour force who were press-ganged into working as weekend camp guards. This arrangement left me free to hunt every weekend.

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Macaha, in those days, was a very wild place. Just five miles from the Good Days Mine, the perennial Nyagadzi River ran off to the east - eventually spilling out of the country into Mozambique. Five miles beyond the Nyagadzi, the much bigger Rwenya River did the same thing. And twenty miles beyond the Rwenya rose the majestic 8 700 foot high Inyanga Mountain. Not a soul lived between Macaha and Inyanga.

Five or six years before my UKAEA appointment, the Rhodesian Tsetse Department had completed a five year long exercise to shoot out all game in the Nyagadzi and Rwenya River valleys - to stop the spread of tsetse flies into the cattle ranching and tribal areas of north eastern Rhodesia. At the time of my sojourn at Macaha, however, the game had started to come back - dispersing into and throughout the unoccupied Nyagadzi and Rwenya habitats - from strongholds in Mozambique.

These animals were extremely wild and I saw very few during my regular weekend visits to the Nyagadzi. There was a fair amount of spoor but sightings were few. Late on the afternoon of my first hunting weekend,

however, I shot a very nice waterbuck bull - but by the time I got back to camp it was dark.

The following morning I drove by Land Rover to the site, with a couple of men from the labour gang, thinking that the labour force would enjoy some fresh meat. When we got there we discovered that lions and hyenas had eaten the entire carcass during the night. I never saw a lion, or a hyena, or another waterbuck, ever again in the entire area.

What I did discover was the spoor of a surprising number of leopards. The big cats seemed to like patrolling the dry stream beds that fed out of the granite foothills of the Macaha Mountains and they left their tracks all over the soft river sands. So I turned my attention to logging all the information I could gather about the whereabouts of leopards. At that time, I had shot only that one leopard on the Shamrock. Nevertheless that meant I was *blooded*. But I still knew very little about hunting leopards and I had nobody to teach me!

I had read about people *baiting* for leopards but had no idea how that was done. So I laid baits *my own way* and I sat up at night over those that had been fed upon the previous night. My intention, of course, was to shoot the same leopard when it returned to feed on the carcass the next night.

The mountains all around were infested with baboons - and monkeys - so baboons and monkeys became my principal baits. Shooting these primates for bait, however, was a lot more difficult than I had at first thought. Indeed, when I look back on my days at Macaha, I think I spent more time hunting baboons - because they were very street-wise - than I ever did hunting leopards.

Early on in my employment at Macaha - being flush with UKAEA salary money every month - I sold my .22 Hornet and purchased a new Swedish Husqvarna 9.3mm with a full Mauser action. It was a very smart weapon by comparison to my old .22 Hornet and it was far more suitable for hunting leopards.

I took to laying baits on the sandy watercourses below the mountains - at sites where I had seen leopard spoor on a regular basis. And I either built a platform in a nearby tree as my hide; or I hid above the bait amongst jumbles

of granite boulders.

I was always settled into my chosen shooting positions by four o'clock in the afternoon. I did this with the idea that the scent on my spoor would have had time to dissipate by dusk - after which I time I expected the leopard would revisit the bait.

The first leopard I shot at Macaha actually came down to the bait at five o'clock in the afternoon. I killed it with a clean shot into its throat from the front, the bullet traversing the whole length of its body. It dropped like a stone.

I shot a total of six leopards at Macaha in as many months; and my mother was having difficulty deciding where to put the next tanned skin in her lounge.

After these experiences, I became very confident in my hunting of leopards. In fact, my spirits became somewhat jaded because I eventually found the task of *hunting* leopards at Macaha totally un-inspiring. I actually felt no real excitement or sense of accomplishment when I shot a leopard that came down to a bait in the middle of the night; and which I killed in the beam of a powerful spotlight. I needed a much bigger challenge!

One of these leopard hunts was memorable, however, and it is certainly worth recording here.

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A large leopard had fed off a baboon carcass I had laid out on the edge of the sandy bed of a dry stream. The bait was tied to the base of a small tree with 8 gauge wire so that the leopard would not carry it away.

Directly opposite the bait site, across the stream, there was a small granite dwala (a solid and naked granite dome) the steep side of which reached right down into the sands of the streambed.

A large slab of rock had exfoliated from the dome. It had peeled off in a two foot thick sheet from the ball-like parent rock.

*This is a common occurrence in granite country. It is called the onion-skin-effect because the curved slab of detached rock looks exactly like the outer fleshy layer of an onion that has pulled away*

*from the parent bulb.*

The huge rock slab had detached thousands of years ago. It had slid down from near the crest of the dome and its base had settled into the sand of the stream bed below.

During the sliding process, the slab had tilted away from the parent rock beneath and, over the millennia, the gap between had filled up with weathered chips of rock and dead lichens. This primitive soil had become vegetated with bunch grasses and sundry small bushes.

The rim of the exfoliated rock slab rose some three feet above the flat soil base behind it. It thus formed a solid wall of granite behind which Jorjo - my native companion for the night - and I waited for the leopard's return.

The gap between the solid granite dwala at our backs, and the parapet of the rock wall in front of us, was four feet. It was wide enough, therefore, to accommodate our meagre personal katoonda (possessions) comfortably. The bait below was 30 yards from the top edge of the rock wall. The site was perfect for our purpose.

As usual, Jorjo and I were settled in by four o'clock in the afternoon - after we had cut out the grass and shrubbery that was in our way. I spread out my bed, in its canvas valise, on the ground behind the parapet. The Land Rover battery was in position up against the front wall; and the spotlight cables were secured to the battery terminals with metal crocodile clips. We checked it and found the spotlight worked perfectly. It was to be Jorjo's task to handle the light.

We sat on cushions with our backs to the sun-warmed granite dwala behind us. I had prepared sandwiches and a flask of sweet tea which Jorjo and I shared just before dusk.

I checked my rifle. It had four rounds in the magazine. I pushed one into the breech and put the weapon on safe. Then I lent the rifle up against the rock wall in front of me. There it was out of our way but within easy reach when the leopard returned.

Then we waited.

Dusk turned into darkness. The developing chill of the night forced us to

wrap blankets around our shoulders. Then the two of us just sat there in complete silence, each lost in our own thoughts.

Periodically I lifted my head slowly above the parapet and stared down towards the carcass bait. I listened rather than looked because I could hear much better than I could see. Every time I carried out this inspection I found everything to be still and quiet. Then I returned to my recumbent position and continued my vigil. My ears were always wide open.

I became absorbed by the fascinating sounds of the night. Faraway down the valley a spotted eagle owl hooted. Very close to our position, a tiny scops owllet *burrurruppped* at monotonous five second intervals. Four different species of nightjars called from various places around us. A side-striped jackal *hwaah-ed* from the nearby road where I had left the Land Rover. All these sounds meant something and everything to me. I could visualise every species as it vocalised into the night.

There was no moon which was a good factor when hunting at night with a torch. Anyone who has hunted with a spotlight knows that success is seldom achieved when the moon is shining bright.

The stars shone brightly. I looked for the constellations and the planets that I knew: Orion's Belt; the Southern Cross; Mars; and Venus. The stars have always fascinated me.

Jorjo went on first watch. I dozed off.

Just after 8 o'clock I woke up abruptly. I sensed the leopard's presence. I cannot explain how or why. I just *knew* it was close at hand. It was that much-vaunted *sixth sense* coming into play.

Many people call it the hunter's *instinct*. Maybe it is instinct. Maybe it is not. Maybe the hunter subconsciously hears a footfall, or picks up a scent that he does not even know he has detected.

I do not believe in mystical things and magic wands. So, even in those very early days of my hunting career, I realised that there must be some betrayal of the animal's presence that the hunter absorbs subconsciously. There is no other explanation for the certainty that the hunter feels when he *knows* his quarry is nearby.

*I will discuss the hunter's instinct, fully, in a later volume.*

This was my first real experience of this remarkable sensation. That night I just *knew* the leopard had arrived without knowing *how* I knew. I was not conscious of having heard anything. I had smelt nothing. I had seen nothing. I was crunched up half-asleep, half-lying on my back with my knees drawn up in front of me when the notion suddenly erupted in my consciousness - and I was instantly awake.

I leant over and tapped Jorjo on the arm. He started at my touch. He, too, had been dozing.

“Sssshhuush,” I cautioned.

Slowly I unwound my cramped and stiff body. In the darkness next to me I could feel Jorjo doing the same. Quietly I lifted my rifle off the rock wall. I was now ready for the leopard.

In tandem our two heads lifted gently above the parapet; and we stared down towards the bait.

The stars were bright, but not bright enough for us to see very much. Directly below me the curve of yellow sand in the dry streambed was silvery-white in the starlight. The stark outline of the bait tree was a black silhouette. The tethered baboon carcass at its base was just a dark splodge. Everything was a monochrome patchwork of black and grey shadows in the ethereal light. There was no movement amongst the pale and dark shadows that would have told me the leopard had come down to feed.

I stared down intently towards the bait, focussing all my senses on the site.

The leopard growled. This confirmed my intuition. I now knew for sure that it was close at hand.

The sound was guttural, slow, continuous - and very loud. Each syllable, each cadence, was well separated from the next. The air all around vibrated with the resonance.

My body, including my hands, began to tremble. The adrenaline was running under high pressure! My heart was beating thunderously. There is nothing quite like the tremendous *high* one feels at the peak of a potentially

dangerous hunt (or military mission). This is the essence of hunting.

I kept my eyes on the bait.

I had never heard a leopard make such noises before, but I was in no doubt that I was hearing a leopard's growl. The sound seemed to be coming directly from the bait site but I could see nothing. There was no movement. There was no extra shadow down there next to the bait tree that had not been there before. I was perplexed.

The growls grew louder. They were now agitated and angry.

*"Ah!... Ah!... Ah!..."* Jorjo exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. *"Yena fani-kah-loh motabike!"* *It sounds just like a motorbike.*

It did indeed. The leopard's growls sounded exactly like the slow beat of a single-cylinder motorcycle engine. The remark was so unexpected, and so apt, that I had to smile. And I have never forgotten that moment.

I could still see nothing. The growls, low-level at first, grew in intensity. I could feel the big cat was getting really angry. This both puzzled and frustrated me. I could still see nothing down on the baboon bait below us. I was tempted to tell Jorjo to use the torch, but I did not want to expose ourselves until I had pinpointed the leopard's whereabouts.

I readied myself with the rifle, slipping the safety catch off. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the dull chromium shine of the spotlight in Jorjo's hands. He too was now prepared to act the moment I gave him the command.

The angry growls continued. The resonance was so loud it caused the hairs on the nape of my neck to rise and to fall repeatedly. The hair on my arms was standing permanently erect like the bristles on a brush. Goose pimples ran up and down my spine. Fear and excited anticipation totally swamped my consciousness. Even so, my mind functioned normally. My nerves, though tight and vibrant, were under control.

I turned my head, directing my right ear towards the carcass.

I knew that by rocking my head from one side to the other - so that each ear has a chance to focus independently on a particular sound - I would be able to better locate it.

I did not get a chance to present my left ear! When I inclined my right ear towards the bait it was my left ear that picked up the sound.

Instantly I understood. The leopard was not in front of us. It was on the rock directly behind us. In a flash, real fear gripped my soul.

As I whipped round to face the rock behind me, my eyes picked up the silhouette of the leopard. It was standing on the dwala just a few short feet away looking directly down at us from above. For an instant I saw its ears standing out like labels, erect against the pale starlit sky.

The moment I started my twisting turn, however, the leopard dropped to its belly and I saw its ears flatten. It hissed loudly, as a cat hisses when confronted by a yapping dog. I saw all this happening clearly, but in silhouette only, for the night was dark and the sky was sparkling in the background with myriad bright stars.

All this happened in a flash of subconscious comprehension. As I was turning I was also bringing my weapon to bear.

I did not aim. My body was not balanced to take a shot - any kind of shot. But as the butt of the rifle hit my shoulder, I pointed the muzzle at the leopard's profile and pulled the trigger. The butt kicked heavily. There was a bright muzzle-flash of red/white light which instantly rendered me night-blind. And the recoil knocked me back against the parapet wall. I fell heavily onto my bottom.

I jacked a fresh round into the breech and I sat crouched in my granite slot looking sightlessly into the now total darkness above. My rifle was pointed up the hill ready to fire at any nuance of sound.

Jorjo panicked. At first he did not know what was going on. Then suddenly, he too understood that the leopard was directly behind us. Not waiting to discover the result of my shot, he took to his heels.

He ran for all he was worth along the granite slot away from me. For the first few yards he carried the unlit spotlight with him, ripping the crocodile clips off the battery. Then he stumbled into some bushes and dropped the torch.

The sound of Jorjo's rapid departure lasted just a few short seconds. He had managed to get about 10 yards along the thin line of brush behind the parapet

wall before he tripped and fell flat on his face. There he lay. Still! Listening! In the silence that followed his heavy breathing came at me out of the darkness. THAT was *all* I could hear.

The leopard's growls had stopped.

I sat with my back now solidly against the exfoliated rock wall. I had turned right around so that my eyes now faced uphill behind me. I was prepared to react - to anything!

Nothing happened!

Away in the distance, reverberations from the rifle shot echoed through the hills rolling up and down the valleys. When its energy expired complete silence reigned. The night birds and the jackal were now quiet. Except for Jorjo's heavy breathing not another sound came out of the all encompassing black void of the night.

Neither sound nor movement came from the rock above me. I did not move. I sat still and quiet - and I listened. I strained my ears. My heart pounded.

After a while I became conscious of a faint gurgling noise, rather like running water. It was coming from close at hand and from the rock just above me. Splashes of liquid fell onto my arms and face. It was warm. It smelt of blood. It was blood. The trickle became a deluge as the gore started to fall onto me in a solid cascade.

I remained silently staring into the night above me, ignoring the blood. I had more to worry about than blood! As my night vision slowly returned, the rock above me began to take shape again. I could see no leopard.

Still the blood ran down the rock. It was obviously coming from the leopard. Sensing that the big cat was dead I stood up, grabbed my valise and blankets, and dragged them away from the stream of gore.

"Jorjo," I called softly, not taking my eyes off the rock above me.

"Jaah baas?"

"Bring the torch."

"Hauw," he replied. "*I have lost it. Is the leopard dead?*"

"Yes... *at least I think so. Bring the torch dammit. Quickly.*"

*“Hah! I have lost it Changamireh.”* Changamireh meant *Big Boss* in the Shona language.

*“What do you mean you’ve lost it?”*

*“I dropped it somewhere here in the bushes.”*

*“Well find the damn thing....”* I replied irritably. *“Quickly!”*

I was standing now with my rifle still trained on the sloping rock above me. The blood continued to run down the face of the granite into our position - but I was, at that stage, standing well to the side of the deluge. My now much bloodied valise and blankets lay crumpled at my feet.

Jorjo began fossicking about amongst the bushes. He was muttering volubly to himself.

*“Hah!”* he exclaimed at last. *“I found it!”*

*“Well... Switch it on.”*

*“I cannot do that, Changamireh,”* he replied. *“It is no longer fixed the battery.”*

*“WELL RE-CONNECT THE BLOODY THING,”* I shouted at him in exasperation. Getting what I wanted out of Jorjo was like pulling teeth.

There came the sounds of the springs on the crocodile clips being compressed. There were scraping noises of hard metal on dull metal. Then, suddenly, the night was filled with an astounding bright light.

*“Shine it up on the rock,”* I commanded.

Jorjo turned the beam towards the rock above us. It stopped dead on the carcass of the leopard.

The leopard lay no further than four feet from the end of my rifle barrel. It had been further up the rock when my bullet hit it - a fact that was fully vindicated by the blood smear on the rock behind its body. Its body had slid down the sharply sloping rock *post mortem*. I later measured the distance: it had been fifteen feet from me when I had pulled the trigger.

My hands were shaking from the sudden release of tension - relief that the confrontation had come to an end. Whether the encounter had been a close-

call or not is anybody's guess. I, personally, don't think the leopard would have attacked us. I think it had simply climbed to the higher elevation above the bait to check out the lie of the land. It had wanted to make sure the coast was clear before going down to feed on the baboon carcass below. *This*, I was later to learn, was something that leopards do on a regular basis when returning to a kill at night. On this occasion, it had inadvertently stumbled upon us on the side of the dwala.

I am sure the leopard was just as surprised at finding us in the crevice, as we were surprised by its sudden appearance directly above and behind us. I sincerely believe that, had I not shot the leopard when I did, it would have hurried away from us over the back of the dwala.

Nevertheless, there was one other scenario that didn't bear thinking about. Had I just wounded the leopard, it would almost certainly have come tumbling down the steep granite slope that was above and behind us - and it would have ended up in the slot where Jorjo and I had been hidden away. It would then, undoubtedly, have taken us apart. Thank goodness for small mercies! Thank goodness for fluke-shots.

The bullet had penetrated the leopard's right eye without damaging either eyelid; and it had exited through the back of the skull. The exit hole was a large and ragged gash. It had most certainly, therefore, been a very lucky shot!

And the hunt had been one hell of an experience!

## AUTHOR'S FOOTNOTE

In August 2014 I turned 75 years old. I can't believe how the years have flown. Nevertheless, I must be grateful for them all because I have lived a fantastic and very special life. I grew up in Africa. I have spent my entire life in Africa. Africa is in my blood.

From the age of nine I had a lust for hunting. In my teenage years I was very active. As I grew older my hunting skills broadened and matured. Ultimately I became one of Africa's most experienced all round big game hunters. And big game hunting has remained my passion.

The purpose of these mini hunting books is to share with you the most memorable of my hunting adventures.

I am credited with having *hunted* over 5 000 elephants; 800 buffaloes; 50-odd lions (including 6 man-eaters); 30 to 40 leopards; and more than 30 hippos. These figures are admittedly, however, only very rough *guesstimates*.

I also commanded, and was chief hunter, of the *culling* team that - during two consecutive dry seasons (1971/72) - killed 2 500 elephants in Rhodesia's Gonarezhou National Park. The team comprised three expert game ranger elephant hunters, shooting in unison. Our weapon of choice was the NATO military 7.62 mm FN self-loading rifle (known in South Africa as the R.1.). Nevertheless, we always had trackers close at hand carrying heavy calibre rifles which we sometimes had to use to shoot the very big bulls. Our average kill rate was 41.6 elephants per day; and the three of us often *put down* between 30 and 50 elephants inside the time span of 60 seconds.

In 1973 I culled 300 hippos in the Gonarezhou's Lundi River.

I have also captured and successfully translocated 140 black rhinos; 20 white rhinos; 30 hippos; and many other species. In this regard - between 1964 and 1970 - I pioneered the capture of black rhinos using darts and dart-guns (of my own design), and a whole range of highly dangerous immobilising drugs. Some of my more amazing hunting adventures are drawn from *this* remarkable experience.

You may want to know WHY I did all these things - why I killed so many

animals? I will explain all this in the stories that I tell. So you will come to understand all the implications - the why's and the wherefores - of the hunting with which I was involved.

The first *block* of mini-books will comprise 5 volumes. New volumes will be added, continuously, in the months and years ahead.

***In these first 5 volumes I have provided readers with a great deal of explicit background information some of which might seem excessively repetitive. This was deemed necessary, however, because I have emphasised that each story must be able to 'stand on its own'. Because the stories in future volumes are dependent - to a great extent - on this same background information, therefore, such detailed explanations will become progressively less necessary.***

In my teenage years I hunted for the thrill and the excitement that hunting gave me - and because hunting was a challenge. Once I had joined the Rhodesian Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management as a game ranger, however, I no longer hunted for sport - although I garnered a great deal of personal pleasure from most of my hunting adventures. From November 1959 onwards, *management hunting* - in essence, big game problem animal control - became part of my job description and I became an expert at it.

Over the years, a great many people have asked me to explain how and why I accumulated such a vast volume of big game hunting experience. This led to me writing my six-book big game hunting memoir series - in which all such questions are answered.

Others - avid hunters all - wanted to know, in terms of *time-spent* just *how much* big game hunting had I done. This proved a difficult question to answer. Nevertheless, one day, I sat down and constructed a measurement for their elucidation. I hope it will provide you, the reader, with a meaningful answer.

I define *hunting* as follows: The hunt begins when we (my tracker and I) pick up the spoor of our quarry for the day; it encompasses the entire tracking

episode; and it concludes when I finally kill the selected animal(s). Whatever happened before we set off on the tracks, and after we had killed our quarry, I do NOT count as being part of *the hunt*.

Using these reduced-to-the-bone criteria, I estimate that I have expended 25 000 hours physically *hunting* elephants and buffaloes, and capturing black rhinos - during the period 1959 -1980. This amounts to 2 083 days - or 5.7 years - of hunting Africa's dangerous big game animals, from dawn to dusk, every single day.

Added to this record, however, must be the time I have also spent hunting lions and leopards - and both catching hippos and shooting crop-raiding hippos - all of which was variably time-consuming but very difficult to quantify. So my REAL time spent *hunting* big game animals in Africa, is grossly in excess of 25 000 hours.

These *hunting guesstimates*, do NOT include the time I spent *culling* elephants and hippos in the Gonarezhou National Park in the early 1970s because - although *culling* these animals required great hunting and shooting skills - the practice of *culling* animals cannot be equated with *hunting* them. *Culling* is a clinical, highly expert and very necessary *slaughter*.

In fact, the term *culling* is not applicable at all to the *management hunting* that we applied to the Gonarezhou's elephants and hippos in 1971/72/73. The correct term to use is *population reduction* which is an entirely different ball game.

I mention all these facts, figures and ideas to emphasise the depth and the breadth of the hunting experiences from which my big game hunting stories flow. They have been drawn, virtually, from a bottomless pit! I have, in fact, forgotten a great many more of my big game hunts - those that were mundane - than those that I can remember. Those that I do remember, however, are unforgettable!

Readers are cautioned, however, to judge each story within the context of the historical period during which it took place; AND to bear in mind the management (*conservation*) objectives that each hunt was designed to achieve. Remember - except for my teenage endeavours - most of my stories are NOT sport-hunting adventures. They were jobs of work that I had to

perform. The so-called *ethics* of the modern-day hunting sportsman, therefore, have no place within this milieu.

So I would encourage you to read the exciting hunting stories that follow in every new volume that appears under the title: **A Hunter's Trails - A Hunter's Tales**. Each volume will be published piecemeal as and when it is complete. Enjoy them for what they are - the very best free-range/fair-chase African big game hunting stories ever told. They are written in the first person and they come from an era in Africa's history that can never be repeated.

The colonial days in Africa have gone forever! United Nations statistics tell us that in the year 1900 there were 95.9 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa; 622 million in the year 2000; and that there will be 2.5 billion by 2100. It is very difficult to visualise, therefore, just what sub-Saharan Africa will look like at the end of this century; and I wonder if there will, by then, be any 'wild' wildlife left in Africa at all.

Nevertheless, all these unthinkable realities make each of these stories doubly unique because they can and will never ever be duplicated; and you will find no better fair-chase/free-range African big game hunting stories anywhere else. They reflect the epitome of what REAL African big game hunting is (or rather was) all about.

**Ron Thomson**