

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 4

A Hunter's Tales - A Hunter's Trails

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By Ron Thomson

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

Bloodbath at Shapi

This is the story of the most savage man-eater lion attack ever to have taken place on a game reserve staff settlement in the history of Africa's national parks.

In 1960 I was a junior member of the Main Camp field staff in Rhodesia's (now Zimbabwe's) Hwange National Park. Main Camp was the park's headquarters. I participated in the annual game count in October that year which took place over a 24 hour period during the night of the full moon.

October is the height of the hot dry season and at that time of the year every wild animal in the game reserve comes down to a waterhole to drink at least once during every 24 hours. And the full moon in tropical Africa is so bright that the animals visiting the waterholes at night, can - with the help of binoculars - be as readily counted as they can be during the day.

The annual game count was a major event on the Hwange calendar and people from all over the country converged on Main Camp to take part. Most of our Salisbury head office staff - including the director - journeyed the 500 miles from the capital to participate in the exercise. Many members of the National Parks Advisory Board made the journey, too, including its chairman, Chief Justice Sir Hugh Beadle.

The counting teams arranged themselves in pairs, or family groups, and each team was allocated a waterhole over which they were expected to count every animal (bigger than a jackal) that came to drink over that 24 hour period. The counting started at 12 o'clock noon on the day of the full moon, and it ended at 12 o'clock noon the following day. The team members took it in turns to stay awake, for an hour or two at a time, throughout the night.

Each party was given the same proforma which they were required to fill in - as and when animals visited their waterhole.

Elephant cow herds sometimes came down twice - once in the middle of the day and once towards evening or just after sunset. The very big bulls nearly always visited the water at night. To obviate the problem of counting

elephants twice, the herd numbers were carefully noted and the sexes and sizes of the animals in each herd were meticulously recorded - as were any individual identifying features: such as tusk shapes and size; torn ear markings; and mud patterns on their hides from previous visitations to their mud baths. A careful analysis was made at the end of the count and any obvious duplication was removed from the tally.

An unofficial National Parks Board meeting was automatically convened at the end of every annual game count - whilst the fervour of the moment was still vibrant. This was possible because almost all the board members were present - as was the department's directorate.

That year, 3 500 elephants were physically counted in the 5 000 square mile game reserve. And this number was, arbitrarily, deemed to be 1 000 too many. They were already causing the local extinction of certain prominent tree species; and the board was shown the damage they were doing. It was unanimously agreed, therefore, that 1 000 elephants should be removed.

The recommended population size (2 500), therefore, equated to a population density of one elephant per two square miles.

How the population reduction should be done, however, opened up a whole new can of worms! There were a number of board members (and field staff) who wanted an official and immediate annual elephant culling programme instituted. Its purpose would be to: firstly, *take off* the full 1000 excess animals as quickly as possible; and, secondly, to remove the annual increment (7 percent of the annual count) every year thereafter. *In retrospect, I believe this was the best and most rational option proposed at that meeting.*

A seven percent annual incremental rate means that, in the 1960s, Hwange's elephant population was doubling its numbers, as a result of annual births, every 10 years. So if nothing was done to halt the rapidly increasing numbers, they would reach (2 x 3500) 7000 in the year 1970; 14000 in the year 1980; and so on, ad infinitum. This was explained at the meeting and understood by everyone, unequivocally. It was also understood that the national parks board would be negligent if it allowed the elephants to increase in number without control because they would completely destroy the park's habitats;

ALL other species (of plants and animals) would then be adversely affected; many would become locally extinct; biological diversity would suffer; and the game reserve would, ultimately, become a desert.

It was also brought to the board's attention that the primary purpose of a national park is to protect its species diversity. National parks had not been set aside for the uncontrolled proliferation of elephants!

Seven percent of the agreed population size (2 500) equates to 175 elephants a year. So (theoretically), had 1 000 elephants been removed from the population in 1961; and had a culling programme been implemented thereafter, to remove c.175 elephants every year, Hwange's elephant numbers would have stabilised at 2500; and the progressive damage to the habitat would have been halted.

At that time in Africa's history, no elephant culling programme had ever been undertaken anywhere on the continent; and many board members were reluctant to agree to this suggestion. If the truth be told, most of the dissenters on the board were fearful of the public's reaction and opposition to the killing of 1000 elephants in the country's premier national park - but they did not admit to this. Instead, they stressed that their reluctance to agree to the culling of elephants inside Hwange was based solely upon their belief that the national park was a *wildlife sanctuary* and that *that* status should remain inviolable.

This was a grossly unscientific conclusion about which the dissenters - as members of a national parks board - should have been unconditionally ashamed. In retrospect, however, their decision was just one small shade of things to come. Today, international public opinion (generated as a consequence of the false propaganda of the animal rights brigade) rules the roost in elephant management affairs in Africa. This fact, in my opinion, will be the death knell of Africa's wildlife; its currently unique biological diversity; and its national parks.

In its wisdom (or lack of it), therefore, the board as a whole, opted for a more *cautious* approach to solving the elephant problem and the proposal for an official culling programme was rejected.

So a compromise was reached. It was agreed - in an attempt to reduce elephant numbers without attracting public attention - that every elephant which crossed the national park boundary should be shot. This suggestion had the added attraction that the meat could then be made directly available to the local Ndebele (native) subsistence farmers in the Hwange region, at no charge.

Consequently, in 1960, the Hwange staff were authorised to implement this approved practice. Tim Braybrooke and I - who were the only single game rangers at Main Camp at that time - were charged with killing every elephant that strayed across the national park boundaries.

It was vaguely mentioned at this meeting, that once we had killed the required first 1000 elephants, we would then be able to remove the annual increment (175) every year thereafter, using this same solution. In practice, however, it did not work out like that!

Nevertheless, this was how and why Tim and I began shooting so many elephants outside Hwange National Park from November 1960 onwards. Most of them we killed in the dense and extensive teak forests of the Tjolutjo Tribal Trust Land (TTL), which were adjacent to the park's unfenced south-eastern boundary. This was occasioned by the fact that the Tjolutjo teak forests were a natural continuation of the teak habitats that occurred inside the park and, for years, Hwange's elephants had wandered into the Tjolutjo teak, in large numbers, during the wet season.

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Five years later, it was clear that Hwange's elephant population was still growing. Shooting them *only* outside the park was clearly not good enough. Consequently, the first proper culling operation took place *inside* the national park in 1965 - and official culling programmes persisted annually thereafter until 1987.

And there was no public resistance!

In this regard, however, the *numbers-game* did not add up. There were many more elephants in Hwange in 1965 than we had calculated there should have been when we did our sums in 1960. We had to conclude, therefore, that large numbers had invaded the park from adjacent Botswana. This movement had probably taken place because, between 1960 and 1965, Hwange's artificial game water supplies had increased in number from 14 to 35. And, in the general desert environment of that region, extra water is a great attraction to ALL wildlife.

By 1965, Hwange's estimated elephant population was 6 000. So, by then, if we had stuck to our guns and reduced the population to the numbers recommended in 1960 (2 500), we would have had to take off 3 500 animals (from the 6 000); and *then* to keep the population stable at 2 500, we would have had to remove the annual increment of 175 each year, too, thereafter.

Even to maintain the elephants at 6 000, however, would have required the annual culling of some 420 animals. And, quite frankly, looking back on this whole debacle now (in 2014) it is obvious to me that the newly appointed scientists who had by then (in 1965) become responsible for recommending elephant numbers, were a bit out of their depths. Granted - because elephant culling was a brand new phenomenon in Africa in those days - they were also *feeling their way* through a process of trial and error and what was called *adaptable management programmes*. But their elephant take off recommendations - always conscious of public opinion - were consistently far, far too conservative.

From 1965 the annual culling take off in Hwange was plus or minus 500 elephants. In my considered opinion, in retrospect - from the very beginning of the culling era - this was at least half the number it should have been. By 1981 (when I returned to Main Camp as the Provincial Game Warden-in-charge of Hwange National Park), therefore, the elephant population stood at 23 000 - and the habitats that I knew in 1960 had been completely annihilated!

The new arbitrary management target in 1981, was to reduce the elephant population to 14 600 - or to one elephant per square kilometre (5 000 square

miles = c.14 600 square kilometres). This number, therefore, was a complete thumb-suck and without any scientific merit.

Whatever happened to the original target of 2 500 elephants? The fact is, fear of adverse public opinion was, by then, completely ruling the decision-making process. True science had flown out the window.

Nevertheless, to reduce Hwange's elephants from 23 000 to 14 600 would require a direct population reduction of 8 400 elephants. If that management target had been achieved, what - I wondered - would public opinion have had to say about *that*? So why not *go the whole hog*? Why not reduce the population to the original 2 500 that had been recommended in 1960? The answer to that question, however, is academic because the reduction of Hwange's elephant herds to 14 600 was never achieved.

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Since 1981 the conundrum has become even more complicated. By the end of the 1980s successful animal rights propaganda at CITES - the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species - caused the elephant to be declared an endangered species (which it never has been) and an international ivory trade ban was imposed (which made no sense at all). The sale of ivory, however, was what had financed the expensive elephant culling programme in today's Zimbabwe. So culling throughout the country - because of lack of finance - came to a sudden stop.

Today (in 2014), Hwange's elephant population numbers are said to lie somewhere between 25 000 and 50 000 animals. This has been achieved (by the elephants) despite the fact that, due to financial constraints, many of the park's 60-odd game water supplies (the ultimate number of waterholes created by the Rhodesians before the time of Zimbabwe's independence in 1980) have been shut down. This caused considerable elephant emigration from the park. The habitats I once knew in 1960, therefore, have now been well and truly destroyed and Hwange is well on its way to becoming the true desert that I have been predicting for years.

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Elephant culling in Hwange began - tentatively - during the winter months of 1965. During its fledgling period, the programme was controlled from the

game warden's office at Main Camp. As its operational and administrative needs became clearer, however, the operation, in its entirety, was moved to Shapi Pan. Shapi is located well away from all the main tourism hubs and is in the middle of the game reserve. From Shapi the culling team was in a much better position to do its job properly because its tentacles could more easily reach every extremity in the national park.

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By 1972, a moderate-sized semi-permanent culling camp had been established at Shapi - from where a small team of game rangers were tasked with the culling of elephants in small numbers, but at regular intervals, every month. They were also - less frequently - required to cull buffalo, impala, wildebeest and zebra. All the bi-products from these essential operations were recovered and processed. Nothing was wasted!

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The white officer staff at Shapi constructed for themselves a comfortable but simple bush camp, under thatch, not far from the game waterhole of the same name. Their *houses* were cool and waterproof shelters, a one step-up improvement on canvas tents. They had bush-pole walls, packed tight with mud (dagga) in the usual African manner - hence their name: *pole-and-dagga* huts. There were doorways in the hut walls, but few doors. Big open holes in the walls, above ground level, served as windows.

Each officer had his own accommodation within the camp complex; and a lawn of sorts was maintained in the middle of the huts.

The black labourers and native game scouts were housed in a separate compound some distance away. Their huts, too, were pole-and-dagga with thatched roofs. All these native huts, however, had rudimentary plank doors because the Africans were very superstitious about prowling lions and hyenas in the night!

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In March 1972 the culling operations had been put on hold. The recent rains had been heavy and the local bush roads were soaking wet and impassable. Staff had been encouraged to take leave. Cadet Game Ranger Richard Dendy

had disappeared on holiday. Fifty-seven year old Game Warden Len Harvey, the senior officer at Shapi - a confirmed bachelor all his life - went off and got himself married.

Senior Game Ranger Willem de Beer and his wife, Hazel, stayed on at Shapi to hold the fort. They had been living there then for five years and, to them, Shapi was *home*.

On the night of 29th March, the resident pride of lions visited the camp and entertained Willem and Hazel with their roars from the central camp lawn. By dawn they had wandered off to the north.

On the afternoon of 31st March, Len and his new bride, Jean, returned from their honeymoon.

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The following day Willem confronted Len with a report that a lone lion had taken to roaming the officers' camp environs, and the native compound, at night. It had visited Richard Dendy's vacant house and liberally sprayed the interior walls with urine; and it had raked the door posts with its claws. Within the confines of Richard's open house the smell of *lion* was overpowering.

In the native compound, the lion had demolished several chicken coops and eaten all the chickens. It had tried to break into a number of staff sleeping huts by pushing on the doors and pulling off the thatch. And it had vomited up the remains of a small python on the officers' camp lawn.

Willem was convinced this was the same lion which, when culling was in progress, had regularly scavenged from the Shapi ossuary. This was where all the culled elephant and buffalo bones were stacked and left to dry pending being ground into bone meal. Since the culling operation had ceased, Willem opined, the lion had had nothing substantial to eat. He believed it was starving.

Willem suggested to Len that they dispose of the lion before somebody got hurt.

Len quietly shook his head.

Willem then requested permission to shoot a wildebeest to feed it. He proposed dragging the carcass out of camp to entice the big cat away from Shapi.

Again Len refused. He reminded Willem that they lived in a national park where feeding lions was not acceptable.

The following night, the lion revisited the officers' quarters and scraped out a place to lie down and sleep, under a window opening on the wall of Len and Jean's bedroom. In the morning, Len's only reaction had been to call Jean and show her where the lion had been resting whilst they had been asleep.

Willem had a compelling desire to shoot the lion. He had a foreboding that if it was not killed it would bring tragedy to Shapi.

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On the evening of the 2nd April, Colin Mathews, Hazel's son from a previous marriage, accompanied by four university student friends, arrived at Shapi. He was celebrating his recently obtained degree in economics from the University of Natal in South Africa.

The following day, 3rd April, Colin took his young guests and colleagues on a visit to Victoria Falls, 200 miles away to the northwest.

At dawn that same day Willem's cook boy informed him that during the night the lion had visited the compound and raided his chicken coop, killing and eating all his chickens; and that it had attempted to gain access to his sleeping hut.

Willem warned all the black staff to stay close to their huts that day, not to leave the compound, to eat early that evening, and to retire to bed when darkness came. He gave his senior game scout, Freddie, a shrill whistle which he was to blow loudly and continuously if the lion returned.

Willem approached Len again and informed him of the latest developments. *"Len... If we don't do something about this lion," he warned, "the consequences could be disastrous. It is my considered opinion that this lion has lost all fear of man and that it is starving. It is only a matter of time before it attacks one of us".*

Len half-heartedly agreed: “*You are probably right in everything that you say,*” he said with a sigh - but he seemed far more concerned about the serious trouble he would be in, as the game warden-in-charge of Shapi, if he ordered the lion killed.

“I have a history with such lions,” he told Willem earnestly. *“I once authorised the killing of a similar pestering lion and I was severely reprimanded for doing so. The incident was registered negatively on my official service record,”* he lamented.

Len then told Willem that he believed the lion would, in due course, leave the Shapi area of its own accord. “*Or...*” he said encouragingly *“when the main Shapi pride comes back, the big males will chase it away.”* It was common knowledge that the Shapi pride returned at least once a month to re-mark its territorial boundaries!

Len closed his mind to the subject. He was still on holiday and in *honeymoon-mode*.

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Colin and his four friends returned from their sightseeing trip, and the de Beer family and their guests spent a pleasant evening talking, laughing and looking at wildlife photographs.

At 10 o’clock Willem *flicked* the lights in warning - preparatory to switching off the generator. Len and Jean, who had been lying in their bed reading, put markers between the pages and laid their books on their respective bedside tables. One minute later Willem turned off the station’s generator.

Shapi camp was plunged into darkness.

Without the constant thrumming noise of the diesel engine, the sounds of the African night were suddenly vibrant. Willem could hear the hollow resonance of the Shapi pride, far away in the distance, roaring into the night. A black-backed jackal yelped from somewhere near the waterhole. A fiery-necked nightjar continued with its monotonous lament: *Good Lorrrrd, deliverrrr us..... Good Lorrrrd, deliverrrr us.* It was still calling when Willem climbed into bed.

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The scene was now set for what undoubtedly became the most tragic and horrific human attack by a single lion in the history of Africa's national parks.

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In his own words, Willem now takes up the story:

Just before midnight on Monday, 3rd April, 1972, I was awakened by the sound of bare feet running in the darkness past my bedroom window. I thought it was one of my game scouts coming to seek my help. The lion was immediately at the forefront of my mind. What had it done? Had it, finally, struck a deadly blow?

Wearing only a pair of black rugby shorts, I prepared myself for the worst as I hastily climbed out of bed. Hazel, as was her wont when I snored too loudly, was asleep in the adjoining bedroom.

What confronted me was something totally unexpected.

A strident voice, filled with terror and hysteria, screamed at me from out of the darkness: *"Please Willie.... Please... come and help. Quickly! The lion is killing Len. Please..... Come... The lion is killing my husband."*

I recognised the voice as Jean's and immediately registered what she was saying.

I have never heard a human voice - before or after - that sounded so utterly distraught. There was a shrill agony in its appeal.

I was shocked to the core. Len was not only my boss and the game warden of Shapi, he was also Hazel's and my very dear friend.

I ran outside. Jean was standing at my doorway gasping for breath.

I flicked my torch beam over her body. She was stark naked and drenched in blood. There were claw and bite wounds all over her upper torso that were still pulsing with her gore. It dripped onto the ground forming pools at her feet.

I switched the torch off and grabbed her by the shoulders; pulling her to my breast; enveloping her in my arms. She was shaking violently, as I had never seen nor felt a human being shake before. Her terror was absolute. I could

feel her blood and tears running down my chest.

I guided her, staggering and quaking, into the house. When I released her she collapsed onto the floor, sobbing hysterically. Then she began screaming incoherently into the night. I was convinced she was going to become unconscious and that she would quickly die.

I shouted for Hazel and, when I turned, I saw that she had already entered the room. She took in the situation at a glance and, with the help of Colin's girlfriend - who had materialised at her side - began attending to Jean and her wounds.

Hazel took the torch out of my hand and in its beam she lit the candle that was always next to my bed together with a box of matches. There was now light in the room. There were more candles in the kitchen, as well as paraffin storm lanterns and Tilley lamps... but they all had to be lit.

We needed better light - and we needed it quickly. I would have to re-start the generator. That would light up the whole camp and enable me to better deal with the lion, too.

None of the camp's lights were ever switched off. They all died when the generator was doused and they came to life again, automatically, the moment the generator was restarted.

With Jean now in Hazel's good hands I could concentrate on Len's predicament.

'Please God may he be still alive,' I prayed silently. But I already knew, in my heart of hearts, that it was too late. No human being can survive a lion attack for very long. Lions are huge and savage beasts. Their strength is enormous and when the lion is a starving man-eater... *Len had had no hope at all!*

Still... there was a chance! Never say die! I steeled my nerves and prepared to do everything in my power to assist my friend.

I was not so stupid, however, as to rush across the compound in the black of night. Without a good light I was at a disadvantage. Lions can see in the darkness. I cannot. With lights on in and around Len's house, however, the boot would be on the other foot.

As I snatched the office keys off the nail in my bedroom wall, Colin appeared. He wanted to know what all the fuss was about. He stood in bewilderment, and then in horror, when he looked down at Jean's bloody face and hands. Hazel had already, by then, wrapped Jean's naked body in a blanket.

"Quickly Colin," I shouted. "Len is being attacked by a lion. He desperately needs our help."

He nodded his head and without hesitation said: *"Let's go!"*

At that moment, in a flash, I pondered the wisdom of asking my stepson to accompany me on such a mission. He had instantly volunteered but I knew he had absolutely no idea what he was letting himself in for. And, in retrospect, I now know that neither did I.

There was no time to discuss the matter. Time was of the essence.

I left my torch with Hazel. She needed it more than I did. Soon I would have the generator on and we would all have lights.

It was as black as Hades outside, and raining. Colin and I were both soaked to the skin by the time we reached the office hut.

In the dark, I unlocked and opened the gun safe where all our firearms were kept. In those days we were at war with Zimbabwe's guerrilla fighters and keeping our firearms secure was imperative.

I fumbled blindly and took out the first rifle I laid my hands on. I handed it to Colin. By the sheer feel of it I knew it was a small calibre weapon. The second one was bigger. Fortunately we kept the magazines full just in case we were attacked by guerrilla fighters in the middle of the night.

I re-locked the gun safe door and, now armed, we both dashed to the lighting plant shelter that lay beyond the office. The rain was easing. The engine coughed once then roared into life. Lights appeared instantly both inside and outside the houses. The camp changed from being pitch black one moment to being brilliantly lit up the next.

I stood outside the generator shed and looked at the Harvey house 60 paces away. I first focussed on the place next to the wall, under the window, where

the lion had lain and slept the previous night. Light poured out into the darkness through the window opening.

At that moment I knew I had made a wise decision - to first get the generator running. The lights changed the nature of the game completely.

I looked all around the outside of Len's house - with roving eyes - and saw no sign of the lion.

I could not believe that, with all the lights now blazing, it would still be inside. The suddenly illuminated house would have been a strange and confined environment for the lion, and it must have known that it had done wrong.

Wild animals are not stupid. They understand these things. Lions, elephants and buffalo that have killed a man, sense that they have committed the unforgivable. When you track them down you can feel it in every nuance of their flight. They recognise and respect the superiority of humans, so they are normally and naturally afraid of us when they are forced to enter our sacred domains.

I concluded that the lion would have vacated the house through the back door when the lights came on - unless it was ravishingly hungry and was still busy eating Len.

'If that were the case', I thought, 'nothing would get the lion off its kill'.

At that moment - with those thoughts - I finally gave up all hope that my good friend Len Harvey could still be alive.

I took the rifle out of Colin's hands and checked its load. It was a Musgrave .243 and it had four rounds in the magazine. I fed one into the breech, closed the bolt and applied the safety catch. When I handed it back to Colin, he advised me that he was not familiar with firearms. It suddenly dawned on me that Colin was altogether a city slicker.

'How stupid of me,' I thought. 'I should have known.'

I gave Colin a crash course in how to use the rifle. I did not tell him how to aim because he would have no need of such knowledge. If the lion attacked it would come at lightning speed. There would be no time to aim. The

weapon was equipped with a telescopic sight - designed for shooting impala in the head at night. I told him to ignore the scope. All he had to know was that he should point the weapon and pull the trigger.

I instructed him how to work the bolt to reload; and how to engage and release the safety catch. In a few seconds flat, therefore, I taught him the rudiments of self-defence against a man-eating lion attack. And that was all the preparation he ever had, to face the biggest hunting challenge that anybody is ever likely to encounter.

My rifle that night was a .375 Magnum Winchester. It had three 300 grain solid rounds in the magazine. These were cartridges used for hunting elephants and buffaloes. My preference for lion hunting is soft-nosed bullets, but there was no time to return to the office to change them. I fed a round into the chamber, closed the bolt and applied the safety catch. Then I told Colin to follow me and to stay close.

Our night vision had been impaired when the bright lights in the engine room came back on. So, when we left the purring generator, we stood for some time outside, adjusting to the darker conditions. If Len was dead there was no point in us storming into a confrontation with his killer when the lion held all the aces.

I reflected on how many times I had heard Len say that he hated cats. He had been referring to domestic cats, of course. I now found it ironical that a much bigger cat had become his nemesis.

The light shining through Len's bedroom window drew me like a magnet. My eyes kept returning to the brightly lit hole-in-the-wall even though, as Colin and I hurried towards the house, I was also looking around for signs of the big cat outside.

We moved quickly but silently over the damp surface of the lawn. The rain had by then subsided to a faint and intermittent drizzle. As we drew closer I flicked my rifle's safety catch off.

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The overhang of the thatched roof above the window was low and the pitch of the roof was very steep. I stopped short of the overhanging beams and

peered into the bedroom from the bottom edge of the thatch. I neither saw nor heard anything - except the muted thrumming of the generator in the background.

I knew the lion was there... somewhere close... somewhere very close. I could *feel* its malevolent presence. For a brief second I paused and contemplated the wisdom of my actions. The atmosphere was electric with imminent danger!

I listened intently. I listened for the sounds of a lion eating meat; of a lion crunching bones - from places both inside and outside the house.

There was no sound. No movement. Where was the lion? Where was Len? A deathly hush prevailed. Silently I eased my way forward, ducked under the low eaves of the thatch and stopped just short of the windowsill. I peered into the bedroom.

Silence! Absolute silence! I had to have a better look around the bedroom. But I was still too far back from the hole-in-the-wall window.

I hunched my back and eased still further forwards. My eyes just cleared the windowsill. I was able to see a little deeper into the room but still not deep enough.

There was no sign of Len. There was no sign of the lion. As I straightened, my head bumped against the underside of the thatch overhang. This threw me off balance and I stumbled. I took a step forward and ended up with my chin just above the windowsill. I was then better able to survey the bedroom. My eyes roamed the room cautiously.

I was holding my rifle across my body *at the ready* with my finger on the trigger; and I was hyped up to fire at a moment's notice. My focus was on finding the man-eater and dealing with it. Nothing else mattered.

Len and Jean's big double bed was lying at an angle up against the far wall. Directly above it was another window opening. Both wooden legs on the near side of the bed had snapped off. The mosquito net and bed linen had been torn to pieces. There was blood everywhere but still no sign of Len or the lion. I began to think it must have taken Len's body outside the house.

Jean later told us that the lion had jumped in through the window

above their bed and had landed on top of her. There it had proceeded to maul her viciously. She had screamed for Len's help. He had gallantly sat up in bed and, somehow, had managed to pull the lion off her - onto himself. The lion had then started to maul Len. Jean escaped from the by then broken bed. She ran out of the house and across the central lawn space in the dark, to Hazel's and my house.

What I saw in that bedroom filled me with horror. What a one-sided affair Len's fight with the lion must have been - in the pitch blackness of the night. No human can pit his strength against that of a lion; any lion. Len hadn't stood a chance in hell, no matter how desperately hard he must have fought.

'Surely,' I thought at that moment, '*he must be the bravest of the brave?*'

The only part of the bedroom that I could *not* see was the area which lay immediately below the window I was peering through. It was a blind spot. So I eased forward, my head slowly penetrating the bedroom space through the window opening.

Too late! In a flashing moment I saw it all. I saw Len's two long legs lying across the floor beneath the lion. Immediately below me, 18 inches from my face, crouched the big hungry cat. Its golden eyes stared directly up into mine. There was blood all over its maw. It had heard me approaching and had prepared itself. It was tensed up like a coiled spring and there, below the window opening, it had been waiting for me - deadly - silent - ready to pounce.

All hell broke loose. The lion leaped up at me from below the windowsill and, with lightning speed and brutal savagery, it assaulted my head in a frenzy of vicious flailing claws and gnashing teeth.

The speed and ferocity of its continuous and unrelenting attack was unbelievable. The sensation of having both the lion's front paws, with all claws exposed, slashing and pummeling my head, neck and shoulders, with its teeth biting into my skull, crushing and crunching my facial bones, was totally bewildering. I was very conscious of the sound of my cheek bones crackling - disintegrating - under the pressure of the lion's powerful jaws.

And all the while there was the resonance of the lion's triumph; terrifying

growls and coughing grunts, and other guttural hissing sounds coming up from the depths of its throat. The putrid stench of its breath drenched my senses, flooding my lungs, penetrating right down to the pit of my stomach.

The lion kept my head close to its giant bone crunching teeth; to those huge gnashing canines that could inflict catastrophic damage. It was totally berserk.

I was aware of the lion's immense strength - against which I was powerless. My head was held between its two piston-like slashing front paws in a vice-like yet volatile grip. From that potent brawn I could not escape. So I forced myself to relax, to acquiesce to the attack and to accept my inferiority.

Within this intimate and deadly embrace, incongruous though it may seem my mind told me this giant cat was a female. And I had been so sure it was male!

I had had no time, nor opportunity, to fire my rifle.

All this had happened during the few brief seconds that I was standing erect with my head and shoulders retreating from the window opening. The wall beneath the windowsill had protected my chest and abdomen from the raking claws of the cat's hind feet - for which I shall be eternally grateful. Had that wall not been there I most certainly would have been disembowelled and I would not have survived long enough to tell this tale.

I was truly helpless in the face of the lion's immense strength. Now, still holding onto my head with the claws of its front feet, and with its teeth still locked into the bones of my face, it sprang through the window space, its enormous weight and speed punching me backwards - catapulting me away from the wall. And as I was slammed back, my head and shoulders were propelled right through the bottom fringe of the thatch, and I impacted hard with the ground. In the attack I dropped my rifle.

When I hit the ground the lion was on top of me. Next I heard, more than felt, my jawbone being crunched by its heavy teeth and powerful jaws; and I knew I must be bleeding profusely.

My mind became a kaleidoscope of colour - a whirlwind of thoughts, ideas and impressions. None of it was real!

There was nothing I could do to fight this animal. It had me totally in its power. I was completely at its mercy. My spirit was beaten. My soul had given up. My only option, it seemed, was to wait for *the end* to come. And at that moment I truly believed my demise was inevitable. I hoped it would be quick.

I lay still and faked death. The lion stopped its mauling and began to lick the blood from my face. Its tongue felt like rough sand paper dragging over the raw ends of my nerves.

'It's getting ready to eat me', I thought with total equanimity. I knew I was badly injured but I felt no pain. Instead, a great calmness and sadness overwhelmed my soul. The end of my time on earth, I knew, was nigh.

I was swamped with feelings of great despair. Whatever faith I had had in any deity deserted me. Everything was without substance. What had my life been all about if it was to end in this inglorious manner? *'A strange notion for one so near death'*, I thought. I was totally but calmly distraught. Again, I wished my ordeal would now come to a quick end. The driving force I had had to destroy this terrible man-eater had abandoned me.

The lion's claws and canines had worked all over my upper torso - good and proper - all over my face, neck and shoulders. The open wounds were pulsing and burning hot. I did not know the full extent of my injuries, but I did know I had been severely mauled. Yet I still felt no pain.

A huge gash, resultant from the lion's dragging claws, had opened up the flesh and skin from the crest of my head, in an angled downwards slash, through my right eyebrow, cutting asunder both eyelids - right through - and opening up my cheek beneath. This had caused my right eye to fall out of its socket because there was no retaining tissue left to keep it in place! The rest of my scalp had been cut to ribbons. The top of my head had been sliced from ear to ear. The torn head skin, and forehead skin, from the crest of my head right down to the eyebrows, was hanging in loose tatters over my face, blocking what little vision I had left.

My mind was now operating independently of my body. Surprisingly -

mentally - I was very calm. I accepted, with fatality, the fact that the lion was executing the final ritual of killing me. Survival, now, would be nothing less than a miracle.

A voice from the darkness said to me: *'Don't move. Just lie still.'*

'So be it' I thought. *'I shall lie still - as though I am dead'.*

And I surrendered my soul to the universe.

'He was a she,' I remembered. So I adjusted my thought processes accordingly.

The *lioness* continued to lick the blood from my smashed-up face. *'Hell....'* I thought incongruously, *'she likes me now. She's not going to savage me anymore.'* And I lay still and continued to let it all happen.

My state of consciousness ebbed and flowed. I tried to open my eyes, seeing mostly darkness. I was very aware of the lion licking my face. I still felt at peace and there was still no pain - just an incredibly suppressed and burning heat where the underlying flesh and bone had been exposed.

I now did not object to the lion licking my face. I had acquiesced to the inevitable. Yet, deep down in my soul I remained in a state of total despair.

Then, out of the darkness came that voice again: *'Just wait.... When she has finished licking your blood she is going to eat you'*. That was a harsh warning but, strangely, it did not worry me.

In reality, all this attention from the lion lasted but a moment or two. The unreal prolongation of time had all taken place in my mind.

Suddenly the lion stopped licking my face. For a few seconds everything went quite still and fearfully quiet.

Then the silence was shattered by piercing human screams accompanied by angry grunts of absolute savagery.

'Colin!' I thought with a start. Submerged, as I was, in my self-indulgent reverie and in my very personal and melancholy wallow, I had forgotten all about Colin.

Listening to his screams right alongside me, I suddenly realised that the

weight of the lion's body had gone. The big cat had left me. My body and soul had been freed. Taken by surprise, and feeling unburdened at last, I sat up. A measure of reality returned. I assessed the real life situation surrounding me from sound alone; and in a flash I was thrust back into the land of the living.

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This is Colin's version of the event:

Everything started to happen in slow motion. When the lion was on top of Willem I fumbled with the rifle, struggling with the safety catch... trying to remember how to take it off. My mind was awl. What was taking place was surreal - seemingly beyond all reality. I thought: *'What's happening? Why am I here?'*

The lion turned its head towards me. For a brief few moments its baleful yellow eyes bored into mine. I imagined it thinking: *'Who are you? And what are you doing here?'* It had seemingly read my mind. I didn't know the answers to those questions.

I was standing right alongside the lion. Suddenly, it reared up off Willem's body and pounced onto mine, raking me with a flurry of slashing claws. Its weight and power were enormous.

I was knocked flat onto my back. The rifle flew out of my hands.

The lion caught hold of me by digging its claws into my buttocks and pulling my body up towards its head. I seized the side of its neck with my left hand, trying to push its gnashing teeth away from my face; and with my right hand I grabbed hold of its lower jaw. It did not, at that time, bite me but I screamed in pure terror at the thought that it might. And all the time it was growling and grunting and very agitated. My all consuming thoughts were to keep its gaping and bloody jaws away from my head and face.

The mind is a wonderful instrument. Despite my dire situation, my thoughts wandered. A part of my brain detached from reality - from the fact that the lion was getting ready to kill me - and I marvelled at the softness of its belly fur as it rubbed against my naked chest.

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Back to Willem:

There was a sense of urgency in Colin's screaming... the sound of fear... of panic... and of desperation in his voice. He continued to scream. The sound was swamped by the rampaging lion's loud grunts and snarls - deep, guttural and powerful. It had now set about killing Colin, too.

With my upper scalp hanging over my face I could see nothing ... nothing at all... but I was able to identify the sounds that were coming from my left front, right alongside me. I could hear that the lion had Colin on the ground and that it was mauling him. I feared now for *his* life, not mine.

Something was hitting me in the face at regular intervals - first to the left, then to the right. It was the lion's swishing tail. That told me it was facing away from me.

Colin's incessant screaming, and the lion's snarling, reached depressing proportions. I sensed that it was systematically and savagely mauling him to death right alongside me.

I frantically swept the ground around me with my hands, looking for something - anything - to beat the lion off. I was actually feeling for my lost rifle. My hand touched something. It felt like a pick axe handle and I thought: *'How bizarre to find a pick axe handle during such a dire conflict situation'*. But it was not a pick axe handle. It was the stock of the rifle I had given to Colin... the Musgrave .243.

Knowing the rifle was loaded, while still sitting on the ground I brought it into the firing position. The safety catch was still on. I released it and tucked the butt under my right armpit, holding the barrel parallel to the ground. Then, deliberately and methodically, I moved the rifle from side to side following the snarling sounds made by the lion. The muzzle made contact with something. A body! It was moving about. It could only be Colin's body... or the lion's? The roaring and the screaming continued unabated.

I now had the wherewithal to retaliate. I pointed the weapon at the sound of the lion's heaviest snarls and I pulled the trigger. And I fired another two shots in rapid succession.

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Back to Colin:

I now know that Willem fired three shots but I don't remember ever hearing even one of them. What I do remember is what I have since described as being a *physical-buzz*. It ran up my arm and knocked me sideways. The *buzz-feeling* was the result of a bullet striking my wrist after passing through the lion's body.

The lion grunted and collapsed over my knees but it was not yet dead. I moved myself away from it by pushing hard against its body with my feet - easing my bottom away from it inch by inch. It saw me moving and took a savage bite at my left knee. I could feel the bone crunching between its teeth. Then it got up and walked away. It swayed and staggered before collapsing, dead, over the top of Willem's outstretched legs.

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Back to Willem:

After firing, I quite expected to be attacked again - immediately. Instead, a few seconds later, I felt a heavy weight fall over my lower legs. Now I was in torment. Was it Colin's body? Or was it the lion's?

An uncanny silence followed. There was now no more snarling. The screaming and the roaring had both suddenly stopped. I was puzzled and afraid. Had I killed both the lion *and* Colin? Not daring to move, I sat still and I listened.

After a very brief pause - which seemed like hours - I called out to Colin:
“*Are you there Colin? Are you all right?*”

Out of the darkness he answered: “Yes,” he said. “*I am here... and I am all right... except that you have nearly shot my hand off. My wrist is shattered.*”

My relief at hearing his voice was overwhelming. I breathed a big sigh: “*Bugger your hand,*” I said in callous comfort. “*It could have been your head*”. And I knew that statement was not too far from the truth. “*What about the lioness? Is she dead?*”

“*I think so,*” he responded immediately. “*She is lying over the top of your legs.*”

Author's Note: Many years later, Willem and I worked out the probable duration of this attack. The whole tragic incident, from the lion's first slashing blow to Willem's face, until her death, could not have lasted more than 60 seconds.

I was sitting up, supporting myself with my hands on the ground behind my back. The skin of my forehead was hanging over my face and I could see nothing at all - even though I knew all the lights were on and I could hear the generator humming in the background. This was not a good omen.

I eased my buttocks backwards, by shoving with my hands on the ground. After a struggle I extracted my feet from beneath the dead weight of the lion. When I tried to stand up, however, I collapsed heavily back onto the ground.

From my sitting position, I took stock of our situation. I believed I was blind. My hand explored the contours of my face. It was only then that I discovered just how badly I had been mauled. I had known I had been injured but, until that moment, I had had no idea about the real extent of the damage. I could feel broken and distorted fragments of bone sticking out everywhere. The entire front of my head, above the eyebrows, was wet and naked skull. Lifting the overhanging scalp-skin from my eyes I was able to vaguely make out a blurred confusion of pale and dark images; and I saw that the light was coming from Len's bedroom window.

I was greatly relieved to realise that I still had a degree of vision.

I got to my knees and shuffled forwards; and, by supporting myself with both hands against the mud wall below the window, I managed to stand up.

Colin hobbled over and came to my rescue. He stood alongside me, holding me erect with his good hand. When he was close enough to see my face, he exclaimed in horror: "*Willem... You have been very badly mauled. For God's sake, don't die on me.*"

"*I have no intention of dying,*" I snarled back at him. "*...at least not just yet.*" And I immediately regretted saying those terrible words. Colin had only been trying to show me his deep concern!

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Back to Colin:

I felt no pain or discomfort. My problem was in my head - a very deep anguish about how I was going to cope in life without a right hand.

Up against the hut wall I saw Willem trying to get to his feet. I could see he had been seriously injured about the head.

I struggled to get to my feet yet felt compelled to help him. My knee was numb and burning hot. My injured hand was totally without feeling. It seemingly did not exist. To stop my nearly dismembered hand from flapping around, I hooked its cold thumb into the waistband of my short trousers; and I slowly hobbled and staggered over to Willem.

When I reached him I was aghast at his injuries and I suddenly realised that I was immensely better off than he was.

Blood covered Willem's head, shoulders and chest. It was running onto the ground around his feet. His neck and shoulders were badly and deeply ripped open, and bleeding profusely. The skull of his entire forehead - and above - right across the front part of his head well above the hairline, up onto the crest of his head, was laid bare. The flesh and the skin of his forehead, down to the bones of his eyebrows, were hanging over his lower face in slabs and strips. His right eye was grotesque. It was out of its socket and hanging, from what seemed to be a cord or a sinew on his cheek.

With my good hand I tried to support him in his valiant attempt to stand upright. At first I failed because there was so much blood on his arms that my one good hand continually slipped off his flesh.

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Back to Willem:

I was able to walk but could not see. Colin was able to see but could not walk, one of his knees having been severely crunched by the lion's teeth. At first supporting each other, we hobbled our way slowly across the compound towards my house. Colin, however, was experiencing great difficulty. His damaged knee gave up on him and refused to carry his weight. So, I picked him up and carried him in my arms, whilst he talked me through the maze of darkness that I was stumbling through. And together we accomplished the

impossible.

As we approached the house I could hear that Jean Harvey was still crying. Colin and I must have been a terrifying spectacle when we staggered through the doorway that night.

With amazing fortitude and courage, and apparent equanimity, Hazel guided me to my bed and sat me down. She wrapped a blanket around my body and, after placing my dangling right eye back into its socket, and rearranging my torn forehead skin over my naked skull, she wrapped a towel around my head and face, and she gently laid me down on my back.

She then tended to Colin's needs.

The terrifying lion attack was behind me. I was back in my own bed in my own home. I had my beloved Hazel to look after me; and I began to feel better. My whole head, at that point bristling and very hot, had become a dull and throbbing ache.

Hazel asked what had happened. I found it difficult to speak as I was swallowing copious quantities of blood. This caused me to cough and to vomit continuously. Furthermore, my jaw had been totally smashed which made my speech incoherent.

"The lion is dead," I told her; and I immediately issued her with instructions. "Drive to the native compound and pick up Sergeant Zwinake (Freddie). Then go to Len's bedroom and see what you can do for him. There is a chance he might still be alive. He is lying on the floor up against the bedroom wall under the windowsill.

"Outside the bedroom window are two rifles and a dead lioness. Get Freddie to recover the firearms and lock them away in the gun safe. He must return the keys to you for safe-keeping.

"Convey my instructions to Freddie, and seek whatever assistance you might need from Colin's two male friends." They were both billeted, that night, in the spare room next to Len's house! "That will do for starters."

Without a word Hazel, accompanied by Colin's girlfriend, left the room.

As far as I could ascertain, Colin and Jean were in separate beds and Hazel

had made them comfortable, too. I could hear no sound from either of them.

With Hazel gone, I had time to reflect on the night's events.

Len Harvey was dead... of that I was now sure despite what I had said to Hazel. I had spoken those words because I knew that Jean had been trying to listen to our conversation! Jean and Colin were seriously injured and they needed urgent medical attention. So did I.

The nearest medical help was the clinic at Hwange Main Camp - 35 miles away - where there were two qualified African nurses. The nearest doctor was in Hwange Colliery town some 150 miles away. It was the middle of the night and we were miles away from anywhere in darkest Africa. And it was raining cats and dogs! The quickest medical response could only come from someone driving to Main Camp to raise the alarm. And the only person who could do that now was Hazel.

Outside it was pitch black; and it began to rain steadily again.

Hazel and her young lady companion returned from Len's house and advised us all, loudly, that Len was all right and comfortable. I knew she was lying. What she had said confirmed for me that Len was dead. She had made this statement, of course, also for Jean's benefit, but I am not sure that Jean was taken in by it. She had been fidgeting a lot during Hazel's absence. Now, suddenly, she went very quiet.

A few minutes later Hazel sat down on the edge of my bed. Very quietly she told me that Len was indeed dead; and that his face, neck and upper body had been terribly mutilated. The lion had been feeding on him when I had arrived on the scene.

Hazel and her young lady companion had cleaned Len's body up as best they could and covered it with a bloody sheet from the bed. It had not been a pleasant task.

Freddie came into the room at that point. He told me he had recovered both the firearms and he confirmed the lioness was dead.

In broken, interrupted, conversation, I told Hazel that she was the only person on the station now who could bring medical help to Shapi. She would have to drive to Main Camp, I told her, to raise the alarm.

I told her to get the Provincial Game Warden, Boyd Reese, to contact Squadron Leader Ted Brent of the Rhodesian Air Force. I knew that Teddy - an old friend - was at that time based in Hwange Town with a flight of Alouette III helicopters. She was to ask Boyd to arrange with Teddy for an immediate casevac by helicopter. All three of us would need to be airlifted out of Shapi very soon, I told her, or we would be in serious medical trouble. We needed to be casevacked to Hwange Hospital PDQ (Pretty Damn Quick).

Hazel declined to take one of the station Land Rovers. She preferred, she said, to use her own VW Beetle with which she was entirely familiar.

Before she left, Hazel arranged for Colin's girlfriend to look after Colin's and my medical needs in her absence; and she asked the other girl student to take care of Jean.

Shortly after midnight Hazel left Shapi for Main Camp in her VW beetle. She took along one of Colin's student male friends for company and support. The night was still pitch black and the rain was pouring down.

After the sound of her VW motor disappeared into the rain, a deathly hush descended on the Shapi camp. Following the frenetic furore of the previous hour the silence was strange and eerie, yet comforting too. I listened absently to the steady beat of raindrops on the ground outside; and to the faint murmur of the generator's diesel engine.

I lay awake and waited anxiously for Hazel's return. Time was of the essence. It was imperative that all three of us got to hospital as soon as possible.

By then my whole head was engulfed in a terrible sheath of hot, throbbing pain.

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In Hazel's absence, except for the perpetual pain, I was quite content with my own company. I felt very ill and my frequent coughing and vomiting worried me. I had no idea what was causing it. I tried to sleep but my mind was over-active, turning over and over again the events of the night... the elements of my confrontation with the lioness... and my humiliating failure to deal with her effectively on our first encounter. The throbbing pain, the coughing and

the vomiting kept me awake. I remained amazed at the speed and the ferocity of the lion's attack. I had had no time to even lift the barrel of my rifle, let alone to pull the trigger.

In some respects I felt empathy with the lioness. She had given us several days of advanced warning that she was starving; and in all that time I had known the possible consequences of not *taking her out*. In spite of this, and despite our superior ranking in the animal kingdom, we had elected to ignore all her warnings and we had paid the ultimate price.

I had to face the truth. My late good friend, Len Harvey, had been responsible for our lack of action, which meant he had virtually signed his own death warrant.

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Hazel de Beer was born in England in 1927 and she lived in the suburbs of West London throughout World War II. She survived several German bombing raids but many of her closest friends were not so lucky. In 1945, aged 18, she joined the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Force - Formerly the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps {WAACS}) and two years later married a chief petty officer in the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm, Len Mathews. At 21 she gave birth to a son, Colin, who was, throughout her life, her pride and joy.

The family emigrated and came to Rhodesia in 1955 but, over time, the marriage failed and Hazel became a single parent. Willem was her second husband.

Willem and Hazel had lived at Main Camp for two years before moving to Shapi; and they had been living very happily at Shapi for 5 years before the lion ran amok. To reach that point in her life, for an English city girl, she had come a very long way.

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Hazel now takes up the story.

I woke with a start. '*Who was calling me?*' It was pitch black and, automatically, I felt around for a non-existent light switch. Habits die hard!

Again I heard my name ring out, this time more urgently. It was Willem. He needed me for some reason. The summons sounded urgent!

I moved Andy, my Scottie dog, off my feet and stumbled, half-asleep, into Willem's bedroom. There I saw him holding a bleeding figure in his arms.

None of my life's experiences had prepared me for the horror that I lived through that night.

In the penumbral light of Willem's torch, I saw that he was clutching Jean Harvey to his chest, the game warden's wife of only 10 days. She was naked, covered in blood, and crying hysterically: "*The lion... The lion...*" she screamed. "*It's got Len. He's dead! He's dead!*"

Moments later, the two girl students, both Australians, came out from another bedroom. Then Colin appeared.

I took over the task of pacifying Jean and treating her wounds. Colin and Willem threw on some shoes and went off to collect firearms and to restart the generator.

Sometime later I heard a shot; quickly followed by another two. Soon after that two bloody figures staggered into the lounge.

To my horror I saw my husband covered in blood, literally, from head to foot. His scalp was hanging down over his face and both his eyes appeared to be missing from their sockets. The bones of his face and head were crushed and streaming blood.

The other man was Colin - my son. Each was supporting the other; and I suddenly noticed that Colin's right hand had been almost severed from his arm at the wrist. It was hanging on by a scrap of skin and splinters of bone - or so it appeared at the time.

Colin, with deep and bleeding claw injuries to his chest and body, had also suffered a bite on the knee.

In order to get back to the house, Colin had had to be the eyes and Willem the legs of the brave twosome, on their short but gruelling journey.

I assisted Willem to his bed and guided Colin to mine. Then I wrapped

Willem's head in a towel and covered Colin's hands and arms with a clean sheet.

Willem told me quietly to go check on Len. Jean, who was still sobbing, told me where I could find powerful painkillers in their bedroom. She had recently undergone neck surgery and had needed analgesic medication.

As I drove my VW Beetle over to Len and Jean's house, I could hear lions roaring in the near distance. *'Perhaps they can smell the blood,'* I thought. The last thing I needed at that moment was to run into any kind of big cat.

One of the Australian girls accompanied me. Parking the car outside, the two of us slowly entered the Harvey house, full of fear and trepidation.

Our dear friend Len was lying on the floor - quite dead. He had been horribly mutilated, especially around the face, neck and chest. Seeing him like that I burst into tears with both shock and sorrow. My young companion helped me to cover his body with a bed sheet.

I found Jean's painkillers and prepared to return to my own house. At that point, Colin's other two friends, both male students, appeared from the hut next door. They had heard the ruckus but had been too frightened to leave their bedroom. Who could blame them?

Cognizant of the lions roaring nearby, all four of us squeezed into my little VW Beetle and we drove back across the lawn.

There was no radio communication between Shapi and Main Camp after 6 p.m., so we were officially incommunicado until morning. But three people needed urgent medical attention and, Willem said, I should drive to Main Camp. We could not wait for morning!

One of the young male students elected to accompany me. As I drove away I was conscious of the fact that I was leaving three seriously injured loved ones behind; and I did not know if, on my return, any one of them would still be alive. Travelling to Main Camp that night was the most daunting task ever asked of me.

As we left, the heavens opened up and the rain came pouring down - continuing, on and off, all the way to Main Camp.

We had difficulty getting to the Main Camp-to-Shumba tarred road because there was water everywhere. We had to drive around several big puddles on the dirt access road that were too deep for my little car to negotiate. It behaved perfectly, however, and very soon we were racing down the tarmac towards Main Camp. The heavy rain reduced visibility considerably.

My student companion was a raw Englishman, and he panicked at the speed I was travelling. Foolishly, he kept trying to turn off the ignition key to slow me down but all he succeeded in doing was occasionally turning off the headlights. This made for a hazardous journey.

All along the way we dodged elephants and buffaloes, and a little steenbuck standing in the middle of the road watching, mesmerised by our bright headlights.

I heard someone shouting: “*Oh God... Oh God... Oh God...*” With a shock I realised it was me. I was asking for God’s help and I believe, that night, He gave it to me.

We reached Main Camp in the dead of night. As we approached the traffic gate I held my hand on the hooter and I kept it there until the sleepy guard opened the gate. Once through the gate, I hurried to the provincial game warden’s house - Boyd Reese - all the while hitting the hooter. This woke everybody up, including all the tourists.

I told Boyd about the tragedy at Shapi. He was stunned and not quite awake. So, without further ado, I picked up the phone in his house and called the Dett Police Station myself. Whilst I was doing this, Peter Geddes-Page, the chief tourist officer at Main Camp, came on the line. He had been aroused earlier by my hooting and had realised something was amiss. And when he heard the party-line telephone ringing he knew he had been right. Something was definitely wrong!

I told Peter my story and he said: “*O.K. Hazel, leave it to me. I’ll get on to the Wankie air force base myself and I will get a chopper off to pick up the injured. Leave it in my hands*”.

That is what I needed. Someone to take the responsibility off my shoulders! You have no idea how that made me feel. God Bless Peter Geddes-Page!

Boyd came awake suddenly and offered us drinks - which we accepted gratefully - whilst he roused his staff, and arranged for vehicles and game rangers to travel back with us to Shapi.

The senior African nursing sister at the Main Camp clinic accompanied us. She had a great calming influence on me and was very encouraging. I don't remember her name, but I bless her.

As we approached White Hills Pan - six kilometres from Shapi - I began to think of Willie, Colin and Jean, lying there for hours all seriously injured; waiting for medical help; waiting for me to return with a miracle.

"They'll be dead," I said to nobody in particular. *"They'll all be dead."* I had begun to panic and to hyperventilate. I was getting desperate. I couldn't get back to Shapi quick enough.

The sister had me stop the vehicle and she gave me a shot of something to calm my anxieties. Shortly after that we reached our house and I rushed inside to see how my loved ones were faring.

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Willem takes up the story again.

After what seemed an eternity, I heard the sound of Hazel's VW Beetle returning. The rain had stopped. I heard her running footsteps as she entered the house, and I heard her voice anxiously calling out our names. It was a melancholy roll call to confirm who had survived the ordeal, and who had not. We were all still alive.

I was by then very stiff and extremely sore.

Hazel came into the room, quickly checked on Colin and came to my bed. I sat up with great difficulty and was immediately overwhelmed by another fit of coughing and vomiting.

In the background I heard, with relief, the voices of game rangers Henry Pringle and Derek Williams. At least Hazel now had some adult white men to help her.

She had brought along a qualified African nurse from the Main Camp clinic. To me, that nurse was an angel sent from Heaven. She immediately gave all

three of us shots of morphine. Very soon thereafter a feeling of great peace and contentment settled over me; and the pain faded into the background.

It was 3.30 a.m.

Hazel informed me that a helicopter was on its way. It was expected, she said, at any moment.

I wondered how that could be. Helicopters cannot be flown on instrumentation alone. The pilot requires a natural horizon to maintain level flight. They can fly under any circumstances *if* there is a natural horizon. Outside at that moment, on that night, with a low rainy cloud base above us, the darkness was complete. There *was* no natural horizon.

I remember then discarding all those complicated thoughts. '*It was not my problem so why should I care?*' Then the morphine kicked-in and, for the first time since the ordeal, I dozed off to sleep.

The generator still hummed in the distance and the lights of the camp continued to shine brightly into the night. They were the ultimate beacon that would guide the approaching helicopter to its Shapi destination.

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My tranquil state was shattered by the screaming roar of an Alouette's jet engine and by the clattering sound of a helicopter's descending rotors over the camp. Henry and Derek had fired flares to guide the approaching aircraft onto Shapi; and they had lit up a landing zone on the lawn next to the Harvey's house.

The two game rangers, and the air force pilot and his technician, carried Colin, Jean and me to the helicopter. One by one, they gently set us down onto the seats and very solicitously strapped us in.

Hazel began crying when she was told there was no room in the aircraft for her to accompany us. It was the one and only time during that entire and terrible night that she surrendered so fully to her emotions.

It was well after four o'clock in the morning when the helicopter took off from Shapi. It was still pitch black outside and there was still no natural horizon. Bemused by the morphine I settled back and let the gods decide my

fate. The helicopter turned gently in the air as it gained altitude and headed for Hwange town.

At 5 a.m. the chopper delivered us on the front doorstep of the colliery hospital. It was another day. A new dawn was breaking.

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I was conscious of being lifted from the helicopter and of being physically carried, on a stretcher, into the building. There I was unceremoniously dumped onto what I thought was a very hard and cold surface. Within seconds a cultured male and very English voice addressed me: “*Good morning,*” the voice said. “*I am going to give you a small injection which will put you to sleep.*”

Those were the last words I heard before falling into oblivion.

Little did I know it then, but at that moment my life had been placed into the hands of an unusually skilled surgeon, Mr. Hey, who had only recently arrived in Rhodesia from the United Kingdom. He had been in the country less than two weeks.

The following fortnight was a time of great confusion for me, of misgivings, of fear, and of revelations about the stark realities of life. I lived in total darkness all that time because my head and face were constantly wrapped in a mass of dressings and bandages.

I was perpetually under the influence of pain-killing drugs.

It was difficult for me to talk so I conversed with few people. Most of the voices I heard around me were those of strangers. From time to time I recognised Hazel’s voice, and there were others of my family, and of my friends and colleagues. I got to know the Catholic nuns who were the nurses, and to recognise the voice of Mr. Hey. They all told me I was making good progress and that all would soon be well.

Colin shared the ward with me and I learnt from him that he was also progressing well. They had not amputated his hand - which I had believed would be inevitable. This pleased me immensely because it was me who had shot him.

Operations there were aplenty. Seemingly every day! But I wasn't sure of anything! I lost count as the days flew by.

During the third week of my hospitalisation, my bandages were removed. It took another two days, however, before I could open my swollen eyes. When I did so everything was blurred - but, at least, I still had partial vision in both eyes.

All the while, I was overwhelmed by an offensive stench that exuded from my healing wounds. It surrounded me night and day for weeks on end and was very embarrassing!

Speech was difficult but the nursing sisters always reacted positively. They seemed to understand my every vocal grunt.

My eyesight slowly became clearer and more coordinated. For a long time, however, my brain continued to receive duplicate visual signals; and the images were upside down.

Mr Hey informed me that he had had to use two metal staples to secure my left temple and that he had carried out major structural repairs to my lower jaw and cheekbones. My nose, which had been broken, had been reset and straightened. My right eye had been stitched back into its socket but it would require further major surgery. Both tear ducts had been destroyed and, over time, were replaced with artificial alternatives.

Three hundred and sixty stitches had been used to put Humpty-Dumpty together again!

The foul smelling odour, I was told, was the result of the still decaying flesh that surrounded the numerous claw lacerations and savage bite wounds on my shoulders and on either side of my neck. For a long time these wounds remained septic but they eventually healed.

After six weeks in the Hwange Hospital, Colin and I were transferred to the Andrew Fleming Hospital in Salisbury (Salisbury General Hospital) where we received further specialised treatment. On the 18th and 30th of June I had more operations to my right eye, performed by an eye specialist (Mr Strover). Shortly after that, I was released from hospital and declared fit to perform light duties.

Jean's wounds, although very serious, were not as severe as those of Colin's and mine. She was, consequently, discharged from Hwange hospital in time to organise and to attend Len's funeral. She, too, was to receive further and repeated medical treatments at later dates.

I required two more eye operations. These were conducted on the 10th of August and the 10th of September, when my persisting double vision was successfully corrected. They were performed by another specialist eye surgeon (Mr Phillips). And, on 1st October, I returned to full duty.

XXXXX

Author's note: Willem and Hazel de Beer were my very dear friends and long-time colleagues in Rhodesia's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management. They have both now, sadly, passed away. I have not heard anything about Jean Harvey whom I never met. Colin Mathews is alive and well, and running a successful business in Johannesburg. He is now using his re-attached hand but has lost 35 percent of its function.

I am indebted to Willem's daughter (by a previous marriage), Carol Williamson: (1). for releasing to me that part of Willem's unfinished memoir notes in which he describes, in his own words, the events of that tragic night at Shapi; (2) for a copy of the narrative that Hazel left behind, detailing her version of the incident; and (3) the anecdotal account that Colin Mathews remembers of that event. I would also like to thank Colin for his enthusiastic co-operation in speaking to me at length over the telephone to clarify issues about which I was not sure. And, finally, I would like to thank my great friend and old colleague, Mike Bromwich, for making all this possible.

If anyone deserved a medal for bravery that night it was Hazel de Beer.

Can you imagine Hazel's innermost feelings, already distraught from tending to her friend Jean Harvey's lion-mauling wounds, when she was suddenly and unexpectedly confronted by the spectre of her husband - his face torn to shreds - walking through the door that night: and when she saw her lovely son, Colin, in the prime of his life, fresh from his varsity triumph, being carried into the house because his knee had been crushed by a lion's bite - and with his right hand all but shot off.

It was Hazel who, in the middle of that pitch black and rainy night, had first

investigated the scene of Len Harvey's killing. She had found him dead and partly eaten, and she had covered what remained of his body with a bed sheet before leaving the Harvey house.

Later that very dark night, it was Hazel, with continuing great courage and fortitude, who undertook the long journey to Main Camp in her little VW Beetle motorcar, in the pouring rain - avoiding numerous herds of big game animals - to alert the powers-that-be about the tragedy that had occurred at Shapi. It was she who had set the wheels in motion to get a helicopter, within hours, to fly to Shapi and to casevac out the three badly mauled survivors. Had that chopper not arrived when it did, her husband, Willem, might well have died.

When reading the narrative of this terrible story, therefore, give a thought to petite, lovely, blonde and diminutive Hazel de Beer. She was, without doubt, the heroine of the moment. She was the real star of the show that night!

**I have now fulfilled my promise to Willem - that I would
one day publish the full and true version of his story.**