

A Hunter's Tales ...

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 5

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)**

Horse Patrols - Getting to know the Bushman trackers

Looking back on the stories in *this* volume I have to admit that when these adventures took place I wasn't anywhere near being *fledged* in terms of my big game hunting training. I still had an awful lot to learn. But, then, when is *instruction* ever enough? I had, in fact, just started on a long learning curve that was to take me - as the years flew by - to great heights in my chosen profession. But in November 1960, at 21 years old, I was still VERY MUCH the greenhorn.

Nevertheless, because there was a shortage of single game rangers at Main Camp, Hwange National Park - who were both available for field duty and proficient at hunting big game animals - I was already slowly being let off the leash.

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In those days, young game rangers at Main Camp were regularly sent out on horse patrols by the senior game warden, Bruce Austen. The purpose of these patrols - ostensibly - was to visit parts of the 5 000 square mile game reserve that were inaccessible by Land Rover because the road network was very poor. So we regularly found ourselves, on horseback, in some of the most remote parts of the park many of which places had seldom been visited by field staff in its (at that time) 32 year history.

We were sometimes given specific tasks to perform on these patrols but, more often than not, we were simply told *roughly* where to go without any further direction. Bruce, of course, knew that it would be the Bushman trackers on the patrol who would be *sailing the ship*. So sending us young game rangers out with limited instructions was part of his strategy. There was an ulterior motive.

Bruce Austen, I came to understand, was a great and natural leader. He was also an impressive *human sculptor*. He knew exactly how to mould the characters of the raw young game rangers who fell into his hands. I was one of them. You might say that I am a Bruce Austen protégé; and I am under no

illusion about the fact that the accomplished game ranger that I ultimately became was due entirely to his early influence on my life. I think that every young man who takes up a game ranging career needs a Bruce Austen in his background!

Main Camp's Bushman trackers had been involved in guiding and supporting young game rangers on horse patrols - and on their first solo big game hunting forays - virtually since they were piccannins. In 1960 our trackers were, in some cases, a second and third generation team of bush craft experts because their fathers, and/or their grandfathers, had been Ted Davison's trackers before them. They knew exactly what was expected of them and they were highly skilled in everything that they did.

Ted Davison had been Hwange National Park's founding game warden in 1928. He was promoted to Deputy-Director and transferred to head office in Salisbury, in January 1961, pending his retirement. I was the last young game ranger to be appointed under his command.

The general purpose of these horse patrols - as I was to find out by trial and error - was to check on the condition of the wild animals and their habitats; to record the state of the water supplies; and, always, to seek and apprehend native poachers from the adjacent Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs). Most poachers in those days used heavy wire and steel cable snares to indiscriminately kill whatever animals walked into them. Their purpose was to obtain meat for their families; normally not for sale.

Wire and cable snares - when the animals broke loose and ran off into the bush - caused the most terrible wounds imaginable. Even elephants are not immune. I have shot more elephants that I can remember that had the ends of their trunks completely severed by a snare. And I have had to put down a great many more because a badly snared foot was rotting off.

In those days, we never came across *commercial* poachers who were killing rhinos for their horns and/or elephants for their tusks. But we occasionally found gangs of poachers who were looking for meat to sell to the Hwange Colliery's native miners. These gangs established big camps hidden away in the bush, or on the tops of high hills - where they *benghisa-ed* their poached

venison before taking it to the mines.

Benghisa-ed meat is meat that has been cut into two-inch square and several feet long strips - when it is fresh and raw. It is sometimes lightly salted but it is always smoked over a low smouldering fire. The smoke and heat from the fire, and the desiccating effect of the sun and wind, keeps the flies at bay while it cures and preserves the meat - which can last in that condition, getting forever drier, for many months. And in that light-weight, dry and cured condition it can be carried very easily in burlap sacks; and it is readily sold, for a good price, in the native compounds on the mines, in the towns and cities, and in the native villages of the tribal trust lands. Africa's people are always hungry for red meat protein.

Such large scale meat-poaching operations, however, occurred only very occasionally. I, personally, only ever discovered one - near Sinamatella, in the hills of Hwange's north-western region - when patrolling on horseback in the early 1960s.

Small Bushman gangs from across the border in Botswana, however, sometimes crossed the international boundary on meat poaching expeditions. They came on horseback and their targets were mainly giraffe which they shot with rifles. They benghisa-ed the meat inside the national park and took it back home on the backs of pack donkeys.

So there were some very important functions that game rangers performed on their regular horse patrols; and the mere chance of being discovered by one of these patrols kept many potential meat poachers out of the game reserve. The evidence of our horse patrols' irregular presence - which the long-lasting tracks the horses, game rangers and trackers, left behind - were important deterrents in the holistic pattern of the game reserve's administration.

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At first I had no idea how Mbuyotsi - when guiding the horse patrols - found his way through the vast and expansive maze of teak forests, open lightly grassed drainage lines, and its many fossil sand dunes. Each scene looked much the same as the last one throughout the region. He was a path-finder

extraordinaire.

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One night we were sitting around a camp fire deep in the Hwange bush. Mbuyotsi and I were in conversation. We were talking about how he knew where to go in the national park. The other Bushmen were listening silently and with rapt attention.

The horses were tethered, close together, to the trunks of trees in the middle of our camp. ALL the animals - the horse, mules and donkeys - were always referred to, collectively, as *horses*.

We had prepared fires - 10 feet out - on three sides of the animals. The fires were lit when we went to bed. The purpose of the fires was to keep the lions and hyenas at bay during the night. The six of us slept in pairs - one pair to each fire - so that we could keep them burning throughout the night.

As we talked, the horses whickered contentedly and stomped their feet. Occasionally they farted as horses do. The smell of horse sweat, and of their fresh dung, permeated the air.

And, in this wonderful ambience, with lions roaring in the distance and owls hooting nearby, Mbuyotsi told me his unspoken secret. It was so simple even a quadriplegic imbecile would have understood.

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What Mbuyotsi told me that night revealed to me, for the first time, that the Bushman always used simple common sense more than anything else, when practicing all matters pertaining to their day-to-day existence in the bush. They did not have magic wands, or instinctive intuitions, which us white people believed they had. Their incredible bush craft, survival tactics, and *natural* capabilities are nothing more than learned behavior.

They had been taught by their fathers, and by their grandfathers before them, that if anything in nature *happens*, some kind of evidence is left behind; and

to find those signs all they have to do is to look for them. And THAT is their simple secret.

First of all the trackers had to understand, and *to believe* unequivocally, that the evidence of any natural event was there to find. We white men have the same instincts and human capacities that the Bushmen have - so if we can generate the same confidence, all we have to do is to learn what to look for and how to find it. Most white men, however, are just not conditioned to understand nature the way the Bushmen do, nor are we as familiar with raw nature as they are - because they *live with nature*, and *within nature*, all day and every day. We also have not been trained (by people who know) to look for the evidence that is there to be found. The Bushmen understand how nature functions because they observe it working, day and night; they know that *somewhere* nature leaves these messages (signs) for them to find; and they have learned (have been taught) how to find them.

As with all human skills, the level of each individual's competency varies. Some Bushmen make better trackers than others; some are better woodsmen; and some become better hunters.

Once I had learned this, their simple *secret*, I realised that anybody and everybody can do the same. All I had to do to be like Mbuyotsi, for example, was to truly *believe* that nature constantly left myriad messages for me to discover, all around me, in the bush; to learn what kind of messages were there to find; and to learn how to find them. And what better teachers could I possibly have to instruct me than my own Bushman trackers?

After that night of revelation - my greatest ever epiphany - I worked hard with my trackers to develop for myself their special skills and expertise. Over the years I gradually absorbed a great deal of their natural abilities. I believe that I eventually became a better tracker than some of Main Camp's average Bushmen - but I never became as good as *the best*. The real maestro, in my opinion, was Ben - who served as my personal tracker and big game hunting companion for more than 20 years. It was Ben's indefatigable help and encouragement that positioned me among the country's top-ranking

trackers and hunters; and that enabled me to reach the big game hunting heights to which I ultimately ascended.

Ben and I, together, became formidable Hunters-of-Men during the Rhodesian Bush War (1964 - 1980). When war broke out, we offered our tracking and hunting skills to the Rhodesian Security Forces and were amongst the first tracker/hunters to join what became the National Parks Volunteer Tracker Combat Unit (NP-VTCU) in 1973. In that capacity we converted our tracking and hunting skills to the military task of tracking down and engaging the terrorists (otherwise known as Zimbabwe's 'freedom fighters') that were intent on destroying - and who eventually did destroy - our beautiful country. But THAT is another story!

I have Mbuyotsi to thank, however, for opening my eyes, my ears and my conscience to these Bushman realities. He, Ben and Sumbe - three top ranking Bushman trackers - pulled out all stops to hone my growing bushcraft skills. I came to love them like brothers and I nurtured our friendship throughout my career in National Parks, whenever, wherever and however I could.

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That night Mbuyotsi - with a great deal of mirth (because, for him, the technique he used was so simple and natural) - told me how he found his way throughout Hwange National Park's 5 000 square mile maze of teak forests, grasslands, and sand dunes. Bear in mind, when reading this, that we HAD to camp next to water. Water was vital for the survival of the patrol members as well as the horses. Furthermore, we covered daily distances that often exceeded 20 miles.

Radiating out from every major water hole, Mbuyotsi told me, was a wagon-wheel of heavy elephant paths that fed out for five miles in every direction. So, as long as you knew in which direction to aim the patrol, he said, and you knew the rough distance to your planned destination, all you had to do was to find one of the many elephant paths that fed into it. And those well-worn

elephant paths were always *somewhere* in front of us - right across our route - over a 10 mile (2 x 5 miles) wide stretch of featureless bush.

Even during the rainy season - when water was abundant and not as critical as it is in the dry months - those indelible elephant paths were there to be found and followed.

Because Mbuyotsi had been leading horse patrols for many years, he had visited most of the national park's principle water destinations, on foot, several times. When he told me about the real facts of the *secret map* that everybody thought was imprinted in his head, therefore, the mystery was solved. And I consider his amazing path-finding accomplishments, in fact, as the epitome of common sense. There was really no mystery to his secret at all.

This is just one example of the kind of simple common sense Bushman bush lore that the Main Camp trackers revealed to me, all the time, on our many horse patrol adventures together. It was the main reason why I enjoyed the horse patrols so much.

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I rode immediately behind Mbuyotsi - and my horse religiously followed all his twists and turns as he walked along through the dry and sandy bush. This gave me ample time to examine (and record) the condition of the habitats we passed through, and that of the animals that we encountered along the way. I had a grandstand view from the saddle and I could see infinitely better than the Bushmen could. In fact, I could see quite clearly for hundreds of yards all around. I was, therefore, the principal eyes of the patrol.

The purpose of the horse became manifest when we encountered poachers. It made the difference between making arrests and having the brigands run away. No poacher can outrun a horse!

Behind my horse walked two pack mules - each hand-led by a senior Bushman tracker, the one behind the other. Ben was one of these men. Kitso was the other.

Behind the mules walked a fourth Bushman - followed by our half-dozen loose donkeys (with pack saddles). The pack donkeys were chivvied along from behind by the last (fifth) Bushman on the team, normally a young apprentice tracker.

The horse and mules would regularly outdistance the donkeys, so - to find our camp site for the night - the man leading the donkey pack had to follow the tracks of the bigger animals. On a long day's trek the donkeys often came into the camp site an hour after we had unsaddled the horse and the mules, knee-hobbled them, and sent them out to graze (with one of the two mule handlers guarding them against lion attack).

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After we set out from Main Camp on a horse patrol, we never saw another soul for the duration of the patrol; and the country we traversed was, truly, pristine Africa,

No matter how you arranged and rearranged your animals, your people, or your equipment, it was only possible to carry enough food for the horses and the staff for two weeks. Survival on longer patrols, therefore, was only possible by *living off the land*; and the longest patrol I ever undertook lasted seven weeks.

The horse and the two mules were given a small daily ration of crushed grain - which was rattled about in an empty baked-beans can every evening. The sound brought the knee-hobbled animals quickly into camp from where they had been grazing. We only travelled between the dawn and midday! The afternoon was reserved for grazing the horses.

Living off the land did not mean *shooting for the pot*! The Bushmen, of course, were past masters at surviving in the Kalahari sand (desert) country of Hwange and they taught the young white game rangers what they could and could not eat. We fed on all sorts of green bush vegetables (marogh); bulbs and tubers; and whatever animal protein we could find.

In my first three years at Main Camp - during perhaps 10 different horse patrols - I can count on the fingers of one hand, how many wild animals I

shot to keep us alive. On two occasions I shot a small grey duiker; on another a warthog; once an Egyptian Goose (shot through the head with a .458 Magnum bullet); and once a porcupine that a leopard had injured (but not killed) during the night. We only ever shot an animal when we, literally, had nothing else to eat.

Every animal we shot we had to justify on our return to Main Camp - to Bruce Austen, the great, famous and much respected by all, '*Malindela*' (*The One who follows!*). When our reasons for shooting the animal were accepted, all was well and good. When our explanation was rejected we never heard the end of it.

We learned to eat water lily bulbs (tubers); tortoises; terrapins (water *tortoises*); snakes (including pythons); leguaans (six foot long monitor lizards); fish of all kinds; young wild ducks (which we caught by hand); and mopani worms. We raided wild honeybee hives and we sought out the well concealed mopani-fly honey, too. (Mopani *flies* are tiny stingless bees!) We regularly chased lions and leopards off their kills and stole some of their meat. We also scavenged from reasonably fresh but abandoned lion kills - after the vultures had picked the bones clean.

In these latter cases, we split the skull open and removed the brain - which the vultures could not get at. And we took the big leg bones back to camp, which we roasted whole over the very hot evening campfire coals. We then cracked the bones open to get at the cooked marrow inside. When we did this, because bone marrow - which the trackers called *Umkandjoh* - was considered such a delicacy, every human member of the patrol received an equal (tiny) share of the spoils.

The most important and more subtle reason for sending a young game ranger on a horse patrol, therefore, was to test his mettle; and to give him the opportunity to integrate with Main Camp's fraternity of Bushman trackers - *on the Bushmen's terms*. Some new young game rangers came back from a long horse patrol, tired, confused and disillusioned. Some of them immediately resigned, packed their bags and returned to civvy-street where they felt more comfortable.

Malindela, of course, received a full verbal report on each game ranger's

performance on the patrol, from the lead tracker he had appointed - normally Mbuyotsi. And very often those verbal reports caused Bruce to recommend the young man's transfer out of Hwange.

Extended horse patrols were very trying exercises - whether you enjoyed the experience or not. For Bruce Austen they served as the ultimate selection course to weed out the wheat-from-the-chaff. Head office had no way of knowing whether or not a young man they had appointed to Main Camp would make the grade. Bruce Austen soon found out!

I, personally, enjoyed every aspect of my horse patrols - especially being able to assimilate with the Bushmen; and to be taught all their exquisite tracking and survival skills. The lessons I learned from my trackers on those patrols - and on other occasions, too - were absolutely invaluable to me.

An introduction to problem animal control - My first lion.

Late in November 1960 I shot my first stock-killing lion. I had been back just two days from my first two-week-long horse patrol when Bruce Austen dispatched me into the Tribal Trust Lands of the Hwange district - north of the game reserve - to deal with a single stock-killing lion.

That year the rains broke on cue - Guy Fawke's day – on the 5th of November. I was to learn, over the next three years, that the breaking of the rains heralded the start of the stock-killing lion hunting season.

The district commissioner (D.C.) in Hwange Colliery town had phoned Bruce that morning and had asked for his assistance. A single lion had been killing tribal cattle - one a week, every week - in the Inyantue valley. He had told Bruce there was a fresh kill, of the night before, awaiting our attention.

It was difficult to get raw native tribes people not to harvest the remains of a cow in the bush, after a lion had killed it and fed off the carcass. Their diet was always deficient in red-meat protein and they were loath to lose the opportunity of acquiring such a rare and essential commodity.

Kwashiokor is a common and wide-spread disease amongst growing children in Africa. It is caused by a lack of red-meat protein in their diet. It results in children developing severe pot-bellies, under developed muscles, skinny legs and arms, and a general malaise. It is most visually manifest by the children's hair turning a dark russet red.

So when we were tasked with shooting a stock-killing lion (or leopard; or hyena) in one of the tribal areas outside the game reserve, we often had mental and verbal battles with the owners of the cow that had been killed. They wanted the meat whilst we needed the carcass - to attract the lion back to our traps; or to our guns. If we had no carcass the lion would simply kill another cow when it was hungry.

Our task was made much easier when there was a lion-kill carcass awaiting our attention.

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Lions become very active during the wet season. Three or four months after the rains broke each year was the time when we received most of the annual complaints about stock-killing lions. The information came to us, via telephone, from the local ranchers, from the district commissioners, or from the members-in-charge of police stations within a 100 mile radius of Main Camp.

Throughout the year, the big males - and the lionesses - put ever greater pressure on their growing adolescent offspring to leave the pride. And when they attain the age of between 22 and 24 months, they are forcibly evicted.

These are not *baby* lions. At two years old, young males are taller than their mothers at the shoulder; but they are not nearly as big as their fathers.

If the young lions fail to leave, there is a chance they will be killed by the pride's dominant male and eaten by their own families. Cannibalism is not uncommon in lion society! Indeed, when I have been after more than one stock-killing lion in the same locality, I often used the carcass of the first one that I killed - after it had been skinned - to lure its brothers and sisters back to the traps that I had set around it.

This eviction process is a natural mechanism that achieves and maintains stable and optimum numbers in lion prides. It keeps the lions *in balance* with their available food resource.

When young lions are evicted, they become *vagrants*. They take to a nomadic way of life because they hold down no permanent territory. *ALL* lion territories in a national park are taken up by resident prides - dominated by the biggest and strongest adult males. Once they have been evicted, therefore, the then homeless and wandering sub-adults are constantly pushed from pillar to post. Wherever they go in the game reserve, they encounter one established pride after another; and they are continually sent packing by the big pride males.

The primary and constant quest of these young lions is to find a home range that they can call their own; and as the young males grow older, to seek out a

territory, too.

A home range is an area where an individual lion (male or female) can safely settle down and where there are enough prey animals to sustain it. Home ranges can be, and normally are, shared by other lions that all contribute to making kills. It is not uncommon to have two or three young bachelors living in an all-male group and occupying the same home range without conflict. Evicted young females often then join them. This occurs, particularly, when vagrants (known more commonly as nomads) find a place to settle down in peace - even though such settlement may only be temporary. Home-ranges are concerned with survival. They provide lions with their living needs: air; water; food; and shelter.

A territory is something quite different. It is an area over which a dominant male proclaims itself king. Sometimes two lions, often once brother-nomads, share the kingdom. When this happens, however, one is dominant. Territorial boundaries are marked with sprays of the king's urine. He then gathers around him a harem of females: one, two, three or four. They thus establish a pride and begin to breed. Territories, therefore, are concerned with breeding. The dominant male, or males, in the pride - and the lionesses - defend their territory against all other lions. And fights to the death over territorial rights often occur.

In adult lion society, their home-ranges also represent their territories.

Few nomads find a home-range inside the game reserve. Fewer still ever find a vacant territory. And wherever they go they are chased away by the occupying adults. Most surviving nomads, therefore, gravitate to places outside the boundaries of the national park. There, on private commercial cattle ranches and/or in the communally owned Tribal Trust Lands (TTLs), they find a place to live where there are *no* resident lions; and where there is an abundance of prey animals - domesticated cattle.

A dominant territorial male lion *never* leaves its territory. It *never*, therefore,

wanders outside the boundaries of the national park. To do *that* would be to tempt fate. The strongest of a wandering group of male nomads would quickly take over whatever territory a pride male might thus temporarily vacate. If that happened, upon his return from a casual perambulation, the old king would have to fight to regain his throne. And sometimes there is more than one contender. Furthermore, by the time he returns all his cubs could have been killed by the usurper(s).

And if the old king is defeated in such a battle, the conqueror acquires his old home range by right of conquest; his territory; *and* his harem.

There are abundant and proven reports that new pride males set about killing the cubs of their predecessors. Whether this happens every time a dominant male is defeated (or shot by a hunter), however, has not yet been (to my satisfaction) confirmed.

Given all these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that territorial male lions ever become stock-killers outside the national parks.

Nevertheless, as the king grows older his regal position is challenged ever more seriously by maturing male nomads. The pretenders are normally strong young males that have managed to survive the rigours of vagrancy for three or four years (after their evictions - which will make them then five or six years old). If the younger male deposes the king and does not kill him, the old man is forced into a state of vagrancy himself. He, too, has to then seek a new place in which to live, outside the boundaries of his old territory.

When an older, fully mature male starts to kill cattle outside the game reserve, therefore, you can rest assured he is a recently deposed king who has lost everything he once owned (inside the national park) to a younger and stronger rival. When he loses his kingdom, if he is to survive, a deposed male lion *has* to then function as an ordinary nomad. And as a *new* nomad, the old king wanders from pillar to post to avoid conflict with the still reigning and very much stronger pride males. His only chance of survival - then - is to find a home range of his own - somewhere - anywhere - where he can settle down and live out the rest of his life in solitude and peace.

Considering all these facts it can be said with complete confidence, that *all*

the stock-killing lions that I killed outside the boundaries of the national park - young and old - were nomads. And as such, they were all surplus to the resident lion population that lived inside the national park.

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On the day I went on my first stock-killer lion *hunt*, Game Ranger Tim Braybrooke - who had been appointed my hunting mentor - was off station. Harry Cante, Main Camp's senior game ranger, had left earlier that day to recover the first of the diesel engines that ran the game water supply borehole pumps. During the rainy season, it was Harry's task to overhaul and refurbish the pumps and diesel engines in preparation for the coming dry season. I was, therefore, the only game ranger available on station to respond to the District Commissioner's stock-killing lion complaint.

Bruce called me to his office where he gave me a peremptory order to: "*Go deal with the stock-killing lion on the Inyantue*". He did not ask me if I felt I was capable of dealing with the situation. He never did, in fact, ever question that issue at all. He merely assumed that I was capable *enough*.

The previous month I had arrived at Main Camp (from the Matopos) having notched up a score of 20 leopards. Many of them had been stock-killers that had killed calves, sheep and goats in and around the Matopos National Park (south of Bulawayo). So I must assume that Bruce felt if I was competent enough to handle stock-killing leopards, I would be able to handle their bigger cousins.

At this juncture, however, I must add that there is a huge difference between hunting leopards and hunting lions. And the difference has a lot to do with size!

A fully mature male lion weighs up to 540 lbs (238 kgs) and it stands about 4 feet tall (1,25 m) at the shoulder. To explain this size: The top of its shoulder is level with the nipples on the chest of a man who is 6 feet tall (1,8 m)!

By comparison, an average male leopard in Africa weighs 130 lbs (60 kgs). Exceptional males (from Sri Lanka) are said to sometimes reach 198 lbs (90kgs) - but such very large animals are rare. African male

leopards reach a shoulder height of between 60 and 70 cms (24 inches) - which is about level with the top edge a six-foot-tall man's kneecap.

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Bruce's only stipulation was that I should take two Bushman trackers on the lion hunt with me; and he named them - Sumbe and Mbuyotsi. Both these men knew the ropes and Bruce was confident they would be able to extricate me from whatever trouble I might get myself into. They were the game warden's second-string insurance policy.

In effect, Malindela had tasked these two experienced Bushmen to chaperone the new baby game ranger when he went out on his first stock-killing lion escapade; and he armed Mbuyotsi with a 9.3 mm Mauser. Over the next decade Mbuyotsi hunted with me regularly (all sorts of big game animals) and he always carried my second rifle. Very often it was the same 9.3 mm Mauser that he took with him on this occasion. He only ever used my spare rifle once - which is a story I shall relate in a future volume in this mini-book series.

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The local native headman - a supercilious Mnanzwa man full of his own importance - walked us four miles to where his dead cow was located. Two of his sons carried the five big gin traps and the heavy trek chains we had brought with us. Another carried the pick and shovel. This was menial donkey-work that the trackers insisted the local natives should carry out.

I found this attitude to be one of the Bushmen's more lovable traits. They regularly made the local people do all the heavy work. It was part of their personalities that I found both enchanting and endearing - because, of course, I was on their side. And they persuaded the locals to carry out their instructions with such arrogance, authority and panache!

This was the Bushmen's way of impressing upon the local people that, for a brief period of time, *they* (the Bushmen) were the superior beings. Regrettably, in all other situations, the local natives of the region held the Bushmen in total and utter contempt.

The dead and half-eaten cow was lying in heavy underbrush beneath a clump

of tall msasa trees. The ground was hard basalt gravel into which it was difficult to pick holes. It took us until five o'clock that afternoon to set all five gin traps around the carcass and to secure each one with 10 foot long trek chains and 8-gauge wire, to large and heavy drag poles. All five poles were left standing against nearby tree trunks.

The purpose of the drag pole is to slow down the lion when it is first trapped. When the lion runs off dragging the pole behind it, it gives the animal no solid base against which it might be able to pull its foot free - as would happen, for example, if the trap was chained to an immovable tree trunk. The drag log and the chain eventually snag against a tree, or a bush, which then anchors the lion to one place - but, by then, it had exhausted the energies of its initial fright. And thereafter it doesn't even try to fight the trap.

The trackers tried to tell me how to set the traps, but I would have none of it. When I set the first one in the non-conventional manner that Game Ranger Jurie Grobler had taught me in the Matopos, Sumbe and I had a serious altercation. But I knew the Jurie Grobler style was the better of the two options.

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With regards to my altercation that day with Sumbe, in the end I got my way. I got my way because I was a white man and I was the leader of the team; and because, even in their own eyes, the trackers were '*mere Bushmen*'. R.H.I.P. Rank has its privileges. I hated to pull rank on Sumbe on these grounds because both he and Mbuyotsi were rapidly becoming my friends.

Throughout the dispute, the trackers spoke volumes to each other in their own peculiar click language.

I picked up only one word that I understood: *Malindela*. So I knew they were discussing how they were going to report my pigheadedness to Bruce Austen; and it became obvious they had been given specific instructions from the game warden - to teach me how to set the traps - which I was not allowing them to follow.

We walked back to the Land Rover then drove through the rough bush to within half-a-mile of the traps. We selected a campsite under the spreading canopy of a large msasa tree. There was no sign of rain so we placed our katoonda - our camp accoutrements - on top of our two 6 by 8-foot tarpaulin groundsheets.

The tarpaulins would have been erected on bush poles, as tent shelters, had there been any threat of rain.

After a simple supper I settled round the campfire with the two Bushmen. We then discussed my trapping methods at length. I tried to get them to understand that Jurie Grobler's method of setting a gin trap was better than the conventional manner, but I did not convince them.

When I lay down on my camp bed that night I became immediately absorbed in the bright starlit sky.

The stars sparkled. They were so bright! It was idyllic . A Scops Owlet *burped* continuously from a tree top nearby. A Giant Eagle-Owl grumbled from a place way down the valley. Three Fiery-necked Nightjars repeated their monotonous litany from various places all around us: *Good Lord deliverrrrrrr us.... Good Lord deliverrrrrr us....*

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Suddenly the night's orchestrations were rent asunder by a terrible roar. I looked at my wrist watch. It was just after nine o'clock. The heavy roaring continued for perhaps half-a-minute.

The air all around reverberated with the force of the lion's voice. The hackles on the back of my neck were standing erect. I could hear the faint but distinct sound of steel chain links clinking, even at that great distance.

All other night sounds were extinguished. The king had commanded silence. Everybody had obeyed.

All this ruckus, of course, was caused by one thing. We had a lion in one of the traps.

Sumbe had been making his bed up next to the fire. He stopped to listen.

Mbuyotsi was sitting on his haunches next to the fire, chewing on a piece of

bone. It was all that was left of a big chunk of benghisa-ed meat that he had brought with him from Main Camp. It came from one of the four buffalo bulls that Tim and I had recently shot on the Dett Vlei.

When the ruckus erupted both Bushmen looked silently, with long and expressionless faces, in the direction of the clamour. No matter who you are, no matter what you are doing, when a lion roars he commands your respect and attention.

Sumbe turned to me and said matter-of-factly: *"We've got ourselves a lion."*

"So it seems," I replied. The truth was obvious.

"Are we going to go down and shoot him?"

I had brought along a small headlamp, as well as the big hunting spotlight that we could connect to the Land Rover battery. But it would have been foolhardy to try to hunt a trapped lion in the night. We had no idea how well its foot had been caught and I had no wish to be charged down in the middle of the night by an angry lion that might still be able to pull its trapped foot free. It was also probable that the trap's trek chain had not yet secured its drag-pole to some immovable object.

So I shook my head and replied: *"No Sumbe... We will wait until morning."*

The tracker was sitting on his blankets looking into the glowing embers of the fire. He nodded sagely. Seemingly he approved. He had been testing me... the new boy on the block... the baby game ranger who had no experience hunting and/or trapping lions!

Mbuyotsi got up without a word. He crawled under his own blankets, hard on the tarpaulin ground sheet, and covered his head. He was asleep in next to no time.

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There will be many people who will say that what the three of us did that night - knowing that the lion had a foot in one of our traps - was not ethical. We had laid the traps so we were responsible for dispatching the lion as soon as possible after it had been trapped; and that it was not humane to have left it in agony all night long. I can understand such sentiments, however, the truth

of the matter is not quite what it seems.

The scientists of the Fur Institute of Canada have spent years studying the whole question of traps and trapping. They say that during the instant the jaws of the gin trap snap shut on the lion's paw, it feels a sharp pain; and that pain persists for as long as the lion fights the trap. When it stops fighting the trap and lies still, however, the pain is quickly replaced with numbness. The pain will only return if or when the animal moves again - such as if or when it resumes fighting the trap.

The numbness is tolerable because, from the instant the lion is trapped, its brain pours massive doses of endocrines into its bloodstream. Endocrines - like morphine - tranquillize the lion and subdue its pain; and they cause it to remain calm. So the lion quickly learns that if it wants to avoid the pain, it must lie still.

Endocrine releases from the brain, however, only last for 24 hours. After that a very deep-seated and perpetual pain sets in. This is why fur-trappers in Canada - by law - are required to visit their trap-lines every single day.

My experience with lions is that once one of their feet has been secured by the jaws of a leg-hold trap, they rarely fight it for any more than a few minutes; and that they lie comparatively quiet until the dawn.

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I lay in my camp bed tossing and turning the night away - worrying - and listening to the interminable sounds of the African night. I had a great yearning to go and shoot the lion but I knew that would have been stupid. The trackers would have accompanied me had I done so, and if one of them had been injured or killed, it would have been my fault; and I would have had to carry the guilt for the rest of my life.

The roaring stopped soon after it started, but the lion grunted and growled, periodically, throughout the night. I occasionally heard the faint sounds of the steel chain-links clinking far away in the darkness.

During the early hours of the predawn there wasn't a sound from the lion. It seemed to have settled down and accepted its fate; or it had managed to pull its paw out of the trap and made good its escape.

Mbuyotsi made coffee at first light and brought a mug to my bed. I sat up and swung my legs free of the blankets. And sitting on the camp stretcher, almost at ground level, I sipped contentedly at the sweet black beverage.

He then lifted my government-issue .375 Magnum rifle from the groundsheet next to my bed. With the sleeve of his holier-than-thou jersey he brushed it free of dew and dust, then laid it on the metal camp table. Next to the rifle he placed my cartridge belt with 25 spare rounds of shiny brass shells.

The pale light of the dawn grew brighter as the sun rose in the roseate east. A covey of crested francolins (pheasants) began to chant far away in the woodland behind us. The cool crispness of the early morning air was otherwise silent. It was also fresh and invigorating. It was time to go.

I got up, dressed, pulled on my hunting boots and wiped the sleep from my eyes with the knuckles of my fists.

I looked at the trackers and saw an aura of expectancy in their eyes.

"*Let's go,*" I said to them. They were clearly as eager as I was to get the job finally done.

I could feel the excitement rising up through my body from the soles of my feet. I had never killed a lion before and I did not know what to expect. My body was quivering with a heavy rush of adrenaline. It was exhilarating. I was afraid but I had my fear under control, a sensation with which I was becoming increasingly familiar.

As we approached the trap site the lion growled. This was something I had not expected. It was an immensely loud, deep and guttural sound.

I clicked the safety catch on my rifle to *off*.

The growling had surprised me. The two trapped leopards I had experienced

- both caught in traps set by Jurie Grobler (and myself as a learner) in the Matopos - hadn't uttered a sound. Lions were clearly different and the more I got to know them, the more I realized just how different they were.

I stopped and focussed my attention on where the growls were coming from. I stood still for some time - silent - looking. The growling stopped. I could see nothing. I understood then that, whatever their differences, lions and leopards had one thing in common. They both had the ability to hide behind a single blade of grass.

Mbuyotsi stood one pace away behind my right shoulder. He had spare cartridges in both fists. We looked at each other, our faces blank and stoic. We both knew the nature of the danger. I was strangely comforted by his close proximity. Nevertheless, I felt I should tell him to stand back. There was really no need for him to come in so close to the lion with me. He was unarmed and could render me no assistance should things get tight. But I said nothing and he stayed by my side.

Sumbe, carrying the 9.3 mm Mauser, was standing next to a tree some distance behind us. Only then did I remember that Bruce had intended Mbuyotsi to have the rifle. The trackers were doing their own thing! Unlike Mbuyotsi - and despite the fact he was carrying my spare rifle - Sumbe had chosen *not* to approach the lion with us.

The contest of wills, therefore, was between Mbuyotsi and me, and the lion.

I moved several steps closer. The growling started up again. The sound, however, was now softer, more menacing than before, and more intense. The links of the chain tinkled - *clink... clink...clink-clink-clink-clink...clink-clink*. The lion had moved - significantly! There was the sound of urgency in those metallic rings.

I stopped again and looked towards the sounds. I could still see nothing of the lion; nor was there any movement in the bushes.

But I knew one thing for sure. The lion was preparing to charge. I could feel it in my bones. I knew it immediately I heard the sound of those agitated, rattling links of the chain.

My nerves were tingling. My body was trembling! Fear was tickling the

back of my craw. My heart was thumping wildly and the adrenaline pumping. The palms of my hands were sweating. But I stood my ground. If I was going to become a big game hunter, fear, and all that went with it, was part of the bargain. It was, in fact, all those exaggerated sensations that made big game hunting so exhilarating. They made me feel bigger than life itself. To survive in such a world I had to have total confidence in myself and I had to keep the aggravating gremlins at bay. It was experiences like this that taught me self-confidence and how to keep my fears on a short, tight leash.

Suddenly the lion launched its attack - with a loud roaring challenge. It burst like an exploding bomb out of the bushes not 30 yards in front of me. Every branch, every twig and every leaf all around shook with the intensity of its noisy eruption. And as it raced towards me it grunted heavily with every bouncing bound, its big yellow eyes, dripping with malice, bored into mine.

I was swamped with a sudden panic and had to forcibly re-steel my nerves. Never before had I experienced such a huge urge to run. My very soul was telling me to run... run... run... It was a compulsive and enormous temptation.

The animal was huge. Having grown accustomed to hunting leopards, I was not at all prepared for the lion's colossal proportions. Its gigantic size alone was immensely intimidating.

Time stood still. Every second dragged itself out to the limit. Every movement the lion made worked its way into my conscience in slow motion. My reactions clicked into automatic mode. No longer was my fear an issue. It had evaporated in the desperation of the moment.

I raised my rifle. It came up to my shoulder with exasperating slowness. I searched for the foresight but could not find it. The early morning light was not yet strong enough. There was a confusion of pale and dark shapes; and all the while I was trying to take in the details of the lion's terrifying charge.

The big cat lunged towards me at lightning speed. It had advanced only 10 yards, however, when it came to a sudden and wrenching stop.

During the first few moments of its capture, the lion had raced off, dragging the log to which the trap was attached, behind it. The drag-log had snagged a small bush and, in its initial frenzy, the lion had wound the chain around the

bush in its wild attempts to escape. That one encirclement, however, was enough to anchor it.

The lion had come to the end of its steel-chain tether. Its nose went down, hard, right into the ground as its trapped front foot disappeared beneath its chest. It then tumbled over, its body executing a complete cartwheel in the air, before hitting the ground very hard; but it bounced immediately back onto its feet.

Now completely out in the open, the lion turned to face me, its ears laid back, growling, hissing, baring its teeth. Its brain was a difficult target because its head was constantly moving. And over the next few seconds it made several attempts to rush me. Every time the chain brought it up short.

The immediate danger was over. The chain had stopped the lion abruptly in its tracks and I could see that the big cat was secure. My time mode kicked back to normal. I approached closer - to within 10 yards range - and tried to place the foresight bead on the lion's brain.

The big tawny animal fought the trap and its restricting chain but to no avail. The closer I got to the lion, the more it roared and bellowed its rage and frustration. And it never stopped rushing back and forth in front of me - to the left - to the right - trying, with all its might, to get at me. Its malevolent yellow eyes never faltered. They bored directly into mine without wavering. It was a chilling experience.

My nerves were in a turbulent state but, at 10 yards range, I stood my ground - immobile - silent - stoic. And I waited. I waited for the lion to stop its agitated struggling. I needed a solid immobile target. And Mbuyotsi, unarmed, still holding spare ammunition in his fists, remained at my side.

With a strange agitated urgency, the lion suddenly dropped to its belly and it lay there, in full view, facing me. Its head snuggled flat onto the ground. Its ears lay flat. Its tail swished behind it, slowly, menacingly, from side to side. Its staring hate-filled eyes continued to bore into mine - challenging - watching - waiting for me to make a move. The big cat was helpless but still altogether defiant.

The butt of my rifle had not left my shoulder. Slowly and methodically now, I snuggled into it, the wooden stock pressed tightly up against my cheek. I

found and placed the bead of the foresight between the lion's eyes and I wrapped the rear vee-sight around it. I squeezed the trigger.

The report was loud and resonant in the crisp morning air. The recoil kicked me backwards - the stock hit up against my cheek - and the bullet struck the lion exactly where I had aimed, punching its head hard into the gravel beneath. It immediately began kicking and jumping about in its death throes.

After all the long hours and protracted effort we had expended laying the traps the previous day, and after all the excitement of the last few minutes, the lion's sudden demise came as an anti-climax. For a few moments we had been surrounded by incredible danger. Raw fear had been raking at our nerves and raging through our hearts. Then, in an instant, it was all over. Relief swamped my soul. My whole body was aquiver with exhilaration but the tension was leaching away fast.

The rifle I used that morning, a government issue Cogswell-and-Harrison .375 Magnum, did not fit me well. It was the same rifle I had used when Tim and I had shot the four buffaloes on the Dett Vlei at the beginning of the month. I had, consequently, experienced some cheek bruising from its recoil after those hunts. I felt it again, now, after only one shot.

I waited out the lion's death throes before approaching any closer.

Sumbe ran up and told me to be careful. I had to smile at his audacity - because throughout the hunt he had been safely hidden away behind a thick tree trunk. And he had been carrying the spare rifle! Nevertheless, he now guided me round to the rear of the lion and he poked it in the anus with the muzzle of the 9.3 Mauser. There was no reaction.

"It is dead," he pronounced the obvious.

Sumbe's poking the lion's anus was a test of life-and-death that the Bushmen used all the time. It was a practice that I was to use myself in the years ahead - especially when I had shot a buffalo (but never with elephant). Whenever I poked the muzzle of my rifle into an apparently dead buffalo's anus, and it puckered with the touch that was my cue to put another bullet into its brain. If there was no reaction I knew it was dead.

I examined the trap on the lion's right front foot and was well satisfied to see

that the jaws were secure around its wrist. I pointed that fact out to the trackers with a silent but eloquent forefinger. They got the message!

The lion was a three year old male with a scruffy mane. It was a nomad - a vagrant - that had been evicted from the game reserve, the boundary of which lay 10 miles away to the south. I was to shoot many similar aged lions outside the national park boundaries over the next several years.

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The manner in which I had set the gin traps created a furore back at Main Camp. It was an issue that surpassed, by far, the importance of the complete and easy success of my very first lion-killing task in the department. The trackers were clearly taken by the unconventional way I had set the traps and they had reported every detail to Malindela. Bruce immediately put me through an intense interrogation and seemed much pleased with what I told him.

“We live and we learn,” he said finally. *“Well done! And you got your first lion!”*

Well done! Praise from the great Malindela! I experienced a huge feeling of pride and accomplishment. And there seemed to be no end to the big game hunting opportunities I was getting. Hwange was coming up to my expectations.

Unleashed - (1) Stock-killing lions

My next stock-killing lion assignment took place early in January 1961. Once again neither Tim Braybrooke nor Harry Cantle were available. I was dispatched to Ngamo where lions had been killing cattle in the Tjolutjo TTL not too far from Headman Mazai's kraal. This time my self-selected Bushmen trackers were Ben and Mbuyotsi. I was beginning to enjoy Mbuyotsi's company and had found him to be fearless and reliable. I was beginning to realize, however, that of the two, skinny little Ben was by far the superior tracker.

Mbuyotsi elected to bring his nephew along - a 12 year-old piccannin from the Main Camp compound - to act as camp guard. I approved the idea. He would have fun chasing away the baboons and monkeys.

Bruce called me into his office and informed me what the problem was. Then, matter-of-factly, he told me to: "*Go sort it out*". There were no further instructions. So I was given *carte blanche* as to how I should organize my patrol, which trackers to select, and what traps and rifles I should take. Malindela clearly had no qualms, this time, about sending me out to kill the stock-killing lions at Ngamo. I was beginning to believe that I was *coming of professional age*.

Immediately upon my arrival at Ngamo, Mazai led me to a cow that the lions had killed the previous night. It was located deep in the heavy teak forest south of his village. Ben, Mbuyotsi and I spent the whole afternoon setting Main Camp's five big gin traps all around the kill.

We set up camp that night under the same spreading camel-thorn tree where Tim and I had camped when we had visited Ngamo the previous month. And I pondered how my circumstances had changed in that short space of time.

Trapping that lion on the Inyantue, and shooting the buffalo that had nearly killed Tim in December - and Tim's report on the circumstances of that charging buffalo hunt - had clearly improved my standing in Bruce Austen's eyes. The doubt in the equation lay in my own conscience because I truly acknowledged my own big game hunting limitations. I *knew* I still had an

awful lot to learn. Everybody else knew that, too. So I had to be careful not to put a foot wrong.

Our camp site was lovely. It was the best possible one at Ngamo. The spread of the camel-thorn branches above our heads was enormous and we overlooked the wide Ngamo plains on the tribal side of the game reserve boundary. There were wildebeest and zebra out on the grass all day long, and I again slept to the lullaby of wildebeest *gnuuuuuus* and the piping calls of zebra.

I visited the kill site very early the next morning and found two young male lions, about three years old, in the traps. I shot them in the head, one after the other, without much ado. This time I used the 9.3 mm Mauser - fitted with a custom-made scope. It was the perfect weapon for such a task.

During these early lion hunts it never ceased to amaze me just how big a lion really is – even young nomads.

I de-activated the other three traps by pushing sticks onto the foot plates.

The kill was located in a place where there was a chance that a herd boy - a piccaninn, attending his father's grazing cattle - might walk past during the day; and I didn't want to have to come back to extricate some inquisitive boy's mangled foot from one of the trap devices.

After de-activating the traps we covered the carcass with a lot of green branches to make sure that eagles and vultures would not find it. I had planned to return in the late afternoon to reset the traps because there was a third lion still roaming about.

Mazai helped us to lift the bodies of the two dead lions onto the back of the government Land Rover and we drove back to his village. There Mbuyotsi spent the rest of the day skinning the two cats. I had forgotten to bring crushed salt for the curing of the skins but Mazai had a large pile of wood-ash at his kraal. This would suffice as a salt substitute until we could get the skins back to Main Camp; where I would soak them in a strong brine solution. I was determined that these two skins would not *slip* (lose their fur through bad treatment).

I guessed that the third young lion would be wandering about somewhere in

the teak forest near the trap-site. I had the time to hunt it down, therefore, and didn't want to waste the opportunity. So I drove to the trap-site, parking the Land Rover in the teak about a hundred yards back. Ben and I then walked the remaining distance, moving quietly through the trees.

I had a hunch that the surviving lion would be confused without the support of its companions and was sure it hadn't gone very far. I hoped I was right! When we reached the trap-site and Ben began a series of ever-widening 360 degree searches for new lion tracks, I followed him.

My hunch paid off. It wasn't long before we found new tracks, made that morning after the sun had come up.

The lion's tracks, easy to follow on the soft Kalahari sand, led us in a roundabout way through the teak forest then back towards the kill site. Ben followed the spoor religiously, moving very quietly and unobtrusively through the heavy undergrowth (sinanga).

The lion had rested in many places. In one such location it had rolled about and wallowed in the sand. It had then lain down on top of the soil it had disturbed. When it got up from there it had wandered about in what appeared to be a very disorientated manner, before lying down again. But no sooner had it lain down than it got up and walked off again.

There were criss-crossing tracks everywhere. The distraught young lion had moved in circles, meandering back and forth across its own spoor many times. This helped us reduce the distance we had to track it - because when we came across a new set of overlapping tracks we abandoned the older ones we had been following.

"He's very agitated," Ben said to me quietly. *"He's looking for his two friends."*

I nodded my agreement and placed a vertical finger over my lips. It would be wise to maintain absolute silence.

Then, not far ahead of us, I heard a low moaning call. Our lion was calling his dead companions in the softest of soft mewling tones. It gave his position away completely.

Ben turned silently, looked me in the eye, and pointed towards the sound. I

noded, confirming that I had also heard the call. I guessed the lion was only 100 yards away directly in front of us.

I pulled out my ash bag and tested the wind. We were O.K. A very soft breeze was blowing across our path from left to right.

Ben waited and watched the dust floating off on the air. He looked at me pointedly. *What was he to do now?*

I flicked my hand, middle finger extended, to the fore - the hunter's signal to his tracker telling him to *landa - to follow the tracks*.

Ben turned and pushed his nose towards the ground.

We progressed slowly. Both Ben and I were now meticulous in picking our way silently through the forest undergrowth. We made not a sound. I saw the odd pugmark in the sand which confirmed that Ben was on track.

The lion moaned again. We both stopped and listened. It was much closer now. Ben looked at me again. *What now?* I flicked my hand and finger forward. *Keep going. Keep following the spoor.* Again Ben dropped his nose to the ground.

The lion was still moving about in a seemingly agitated manner. Intermittently it moaned softly. I re-judged the distance. It was now no more than 50 yards ahead of us.

I poked the muzzle of my rifle into Ben's buttocks. The tracker stopped and looked back at me. I indicated, by silent gesture, that I wanted to take the lead. I had determined that if the lion continued moaning, I could bridge gap between us much more quickly if we abandoned the spoor and I simply moved towards the sound.

Ben shifted to one side and let me pass. He extracted a pack of twenty cartridges from a breast pocket of his bush shirt and slipped the cardboard sleeve open. As I walked past him my eye caught the glint of brass - that I always looked for. It assured me that Ben was ready to support me with whatever ammo I might need. Reloading from his hands was much quicker than drawing from my cartridge belt.

I now walked more briskly - but altogether silent - towards where the lion

was still moaning softly. It was located to my immediate front. As I drew closer the sounds moved to my right front. There was a pause. No more calls came from the lion. I stopped to listen. When the moaning next continued the sounds were coming from my left front.

'This lion is clearly very disturbed', I thought. It was missing its vagrant companions and advertising its presence in the hope that they would hear him, and respond. As Ben had said, it was trying to call up its two lost siblings not realizing they were dead.

I tested the wind. It was still blowing from left to right. If the lion stayed on my left hand side, I realised, it would never smell us. I hurried forward, flicking the safety catch on my rifle into the fully *off* position. I was now ready for anything. The gap narrowed to 30 yards. Strangely I felt no fear. My nerves were under control. I was completely in command of my emotions. I enjoyed the superior feeling.

We entered a small pocket of msusu scrub. Here long grass replaced the heavy-leafed understory of the teak. The soft moans were much louder now. I could sense that I was right on top of the lion. It had had no idea that Ben and I were so close at hand. The fact that it continued to moan reassured me of that fact. We were soon close enough for me to hear it walking about, its feet shuffling amongst the dry leaf litter underfoot.

There was the sound of tall grass being disturbed as the agitated lion pushed its way through the brush. My senses were on high alert. Contact was imminent. Not far away, to my left, I saw the grass tops moving. The lion was coming towards me. I stood still and waited. The lion came on - moaning continuously.

I had my rifle butt on my shoulder when it pushed its way through the last of the grass sward on my left hand side. It was no more than ten paces from me when I first saw its tawny body sliding through the grass. It came on, breaking cover right in front of me. Five paces separated us. Then it saw me. It stopped dead in its tracks, lifted its head high and looked me straight in the eye. At that very moment its head was knocked backwards as my bullet ploughed through its brain.

Like the two lions I had trapped the previous night - and shot this morning -

this one was a young nomadic male. It had a scruffy yellow mane around its neck.

We had accounted for all three of the Ngamo stock-killing lions I had come to shoot. I should, there and then, have broken camp and headed back to Main Camp. My task had been accomplished. By the time we had finished skinning the last of the three lions however, the day was gone. I was physically and mentally exhausted. I was learning that the tension, the concentration, and the constant exertion when hunting dangerous game, takes the stuffing out of you.

Dusk found me sitting in my camp chair under the spreading camel thorn tree, gazing into the red hot embers of our campfire. I was mesmerized by the ephemeral flickering of the almost invisible purple flames that were running close to, and all over, the glowing coals. I can look into the embers of a campfire, or water running over stones in a stream - endlessly - without ever feeling bored.

That night the wildebeest and zebra entertained us with their nocturnal chorus. The jackals yakked, the hyenas howled, and the owls hooted. There was no roaring of lions.

I slept like the dead

Unleashed - (2) Crop-raiding elephants

We were just about to break camp the following morning when Mazai arrived to speak with me. There was another Ndebele man with him. The stranger was from a village about 10 miles south of Ngamo. He had heard there was a game ranger shooting stock-killing lions for Mazai, so he had pedaled his bicycle through the middle of the night to ask for Mazai's help. Two elephant bulls had been raiding his crops nightly throughout the previous week and he wanted me to go back to his village with him and to shoot them. He believed that Mazai would be able to persuade me to help him.

So Mazai requested of me: *"Would I please return with his friend to shoot the elephants that have been raiding his crops?"*

I had no mandate from Bruce Austen to shoot elephants. Indeed, I had not shot an elephant without Tim Braybrooke in attendance - ever - except for the old bull, *Juapi*, that Game Ranger Tony Boyce (from Hwange's Robin's Camp) and I had killed together many weeks previously. All that Bruce had instructed me to do on this occasion was to deal with the stock killing lions at Ngamo. I had done that. Prudence told me that I should decline the request and return to Main Camp.

But I pondered the problem.

In those days we carried no radios. There were no telephones at Ngamo. It was impossible, therefore, for me to get in touch with Main Camp. In situations like this the game rangers of Hwange made their own decisions and acted on them accordingly. Tim would have done what had to be done. He would have shot both of the crop raiding elephants. But I was not Tim Braybrooke. I was the new boy on the block and, compared to Tim, I had very limited elephant hunting experience.

I was in a quandary. I did not know if Malindela considered me competent enough to make this kind of decision on my own. Quite frankly I didn't think so. Indeed, deep down in my psyche I *knew* he would not have approved. Still I vacillated.

I really *wanted* to hunt these elephants!

The strange native man watched me closely. He picked up my hesitation and he pleaded: *“Haaaie.... Nkosana (Young Chief). The elephants have eaten nearly all my family’s mealies (maize crop)... PLEASE Nkosana. Come and shoot them. They have been raiding all the people’s gardens every night now for over a week. There are just two of them. Please Nkosana. Please come and shoot them.”*

He appeared on the verge of tears. I empathized with him. It was devastating to have two huge elephants destroy your family’s entire annual food supply in just one or two nights.

I recalled the big smile on Bruce’s face when, the morning after Tony and I had killed the crafty old bull, Juapi, he had congratulated us both on killing our first solo elephant together.

“So now you have earned your wings,” Bruce had said. *“Now you think you are qualified to go hunt elephants on your own.”* Then he had looked at us both more sternly. *“That day will come,”* he said soberly. *“When it does come, just remember you still have an awful lot to learn about shooting elephants. I don’t want you going ape on me. Don’t think you know it all. Don’t ever take chances. If you do, you will end up dead.”*

Jurie Grobler has used those self-same words - *“You will end up dead”* - to caution me not to be foolhardy when hunting leopards in the Matopos. On both occasions I had taken those words to heart. But none of that helped me to make a decision about shooting these two elephants now. The question had nothing to do with *“ending up dead”*. It was quite simply: *‘Should I go and shoot them now, or should I not.’*

I thought about the fact that it was now policy to shoot as many elephants as we could in the Tjolutjo TTL. Hwange needed its elephant numbers reduced!

“Nkosana.... Please man....” That is a South Africanism, I thought obliquely - using the word *man* in that manner. I looked at the Ndebele tribesman more acutely. I realised then that he must have spent some time working underground in one of Johannesburg’s gold mines. Not that *that* made any difference to the decision I was mulling over. My mind was procrastinating!

Mazai stood quietly; and he watched me carefully as my mind was making

cartwheels. His face was expressionless and I wondered if he knew what I was thinking.

Suddenly I made up my mind. I was going to do it!

“O.K. then,” I said at last. “Mbuyotsi, I want you to come with Ben and me today. You can carry the 9.3 Mauser - just in case we have need of it. You had better brief your nephew and tell him not to leave the camp unattended in our absence.”

Mazai nodded. A smile spread across his face. The other man was ecstatic. I think they had both immediately begun to anticipate loads of fresh elephant meat for their families and the local people. *They* had their priorities right!

Mbuyotsi smiled too. I was falling into the habit of using Ben as my lead tracker which, if I persisted, would mean I would be using Mbuyotsi less and less. I guess Mbuyotsi was feeling a little unwanted and unloved. I wished I could retain BOTH their services. I liked them equally well - but Ben was definitely the better tracker.

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An hour later the three of us were following the tracks of two big elephant bulls out of the complainant's mealie land (maize field). I was feeling uncomfortable knowing that I did not have Bruce's specific permission to hunt elephants on my own. Indeed, to the contrary, I was sure he would *not* have approved. On the other hand, neither did I have any instruction from him *not* to do so. He had said, after Tony's and my killing of old Juapi, that: *“I was now qualified to hunt elephants on my own.”*

‘Well... He had not said that exactly, but he had strongly implied it. Hadn't he?????’

I was twisting Bruce's words around to suit my current circumstances. And I knew it!

I decided to put the matter behind me. Come hell or high water, I was going to do this hunt today whatever it was Bruce had said, or implied, or not. I had already made up my mind. What Bruce's reaction to it was going to be was something that I would deal with later. I believed that all would be all right - and forgiven - provided I did not *mess up* today. The possibility of me

returning to Main Camp to tell Bruce Austen that I had wounded one of these elephants was just unthinkable - and that terrible thought rankled in my mind all morning.

The die, in any case, was cast. I was *on* the hunt.

The elephants had left the lands sometime after midnight. As the complainant had said, they had made a real mess of his crop. I wondered how the man was going to feed his family for the rest of the year. But that was not my problem. At least, hopefully, he would get a lot of meat today in compensation.

With Ben in the lead and Mbuyotsi behind me carrying the 9.3 mm Mauser, we wound our way through the sinanga beneath the teak trees. The complainant walked behind carrying two canvas josaks full of water.

The tracking was easy but the breeze was fickle, blowing first this way then that. We had no choice but to ignore it and to follow the spoor. I just hoped the wind would settle before we started closing the final gap. As luck would have it, that is exactly what happened.

Towards midday we heard the elephants pushing their way gently through the sinanga ahead of us. The coarse sound of heavy brush slowly scratching across tough hide was becoming familiar. We all stopped to listen.

The elephants were moving but they had not been disturbed. They were travelling very slowly, stopping often to feed on tasty tidbits they found in the forest undergrowth. Every now and again I heard one of them chewing on a stick. There was also the intermittent sound of big ears flapping gently. And there was a lot of heavy sighing, the air expelling hollowly from the ends of their trunks.

I pulled out my ash bag and tested the wind. The cloud of white wood ash drifted off on the breeze. It was blowing consistently now towards our front and slightly to the right.

I poked Ben in the buttocks with the muzzle of my rifle and, when he looked around, I made a silent hand gesture that told him to leave the tracks and move ahead to the right. We knew where the elephants were - we could hear them - so our approach now needed to be guided by the wind and not by the

tracks. He understood. We moved off into the sinanga following a diverging course to that being taken by the elephants. The gentle breeze blew directly onto our backs. We progressed slowly, stopping often to listen - to determine what the elephant were doing on our far left front. It was a game of hide and seek.

Ten minutes later we drew opposite the jumbos. We turned then, and headed directly towards them. The breeze was now blowing from our left front to our right back. Our position was perfect.

The elephants were, at that stage, over a hundred yards away - still out of sight. Their behavior during all this while had not changed. They were still walking very slowly, stopping often, feeding in a desultory manner, surrounded by the forest's heavy undergrowth.

I listened carefully to the sounds of their movements. They were separated from each other by, perhaps, 30 yards. They were clearly still very much a team but they had drifted apart as they meandered through the trees. This was not what I wanted. If I was going to kill both these elephants - as I intended to - I needed them to be very much closer together.

I looked at my watch. It was just after midday. I remembered the advice that Tim's tracker, Japan, had given him recently - when we had been closing with the very first breeding herd of elephants we had wiped out. He had told Tim that we should not just rush in and shoot them. *'Rather'*, he had said, *'we wait and catch them when they are bunched up and asleep during the hottest time of the day'*. And he had been right. The unfortunate but necessary slaughter of those animals that day had been clean and efficient; and the kill had been all over in less than one minute.

I remembered Japan's words very clearly; and I judged our two bulls would very soon be settling down into their siesta mode.

The heat was oppressive. The sweat was pouring off my body in heavy rivulets. I could feel it running down between the dorsal muscles on my back. My armpits were awash. I pulled a handkerchief from one of my trouser pockets and wiped my face. But no sooner was my face dry than it beaded up again. There was a constant puddle of sweat on my brow, supported by the hairs of my eyebrows. It dripped off continuously in front of

my eyes. The palms of my hands were clammy. I had to perpetually wipe them dry against the fronts of my short trousers. I didn't know when I was going to have to use my rifle but wet hands would make my weapon-handling slippery. I *had* to keep my hands dry.

Our position with regards the wind was now perfect and the elephants appeared to be almost immobile. We still could not see them but we knew where they were. Ever more, I began to feel sure they were preparing for their heat-of-the-day doze. So I decided to wait out the small period of time it would take for them to get properly settled. I wanted them to be close together, and sound asleep on their feet, when I fired my first shot.

I made silent gestures to everybody, telling them of my plan with hand signals and in whispers. They nodded in agreement. Ben, who had been carrying my rifle all morning, leant it up against the trunk of a big teak tree and he sat down with his back against the bole. I sat down beside him. Mbuyotsi and his native companion, found other places to sit. We passed the josaks round and each of us drank thirstily. Then we waited. And we dozed. Nevertheless, every one of us kept our ears open, listening for elephant sounds and movement.

The midday silence in the forest was eerie. None of us spoke a word. We just sat there quietly on the forest floor amidst its thick carpet of dried leaves that had accumulated from several previous winters. We were each absorbed in our own thoughts. No bird sang. No cricket cricked. All we could hear, every now and again, was the gentle sound of movement in the distance as one elephant or the other moved a few paces forwards in the undergrowth; the odd murmuring growl; and those interminable deep and tinny-sounding sighs.

The first intimation that something was happening was when one of the jumbos growled heavily from very deep down in its throat. Its soft and guttural voice was filtered by the heavy forest shrubbery. The other elephant responded from some distance away.

There followed the sound of stiff brush scraping over tough hide. I visualised what was happening. One of the elephants was moving towards the other. When the two of them came together they growled softly at each other. They

were *talking* together, quietly, in their own language.

I heard elephant turds hitting the ground. Dull thuds in the distance! I listened carefully. Thereafter, there was a more acute sound - a prolonged, bubbly and liquid fart. There was the sound of water gushing onto the sand as one of them urinated.

Mbuyotsi giggled. I looked at him sternly and shook my head. He shut up and looked at me - contrite. More heavy droppings hit the ground. The other elephant was relieving himself!

All this was followed by the hollow resonance of an elephant's plank-like ears pushing through the heavy sinanga. The rasping sounds grew faster and faster - more urgent than before.

"Come," I said softly to the trackers. "*Yena hamba!*" *They are moving out!*

I rose to my feet, picking up my rifle from where it was leaning up against the tree trunk. I checked the load, confirmed I had one round up the spout, and I put the rifle onto *safe*. The elephants were close! I had decided that I would carry the weapon myself from here on. And I walked ahead of the pack directly towards where we could still hear the elephants moving away.

I stopped every now and again to listen. Every time I stopped I heard the sound of elephants pushing their way through the sinanga - getting ever further away. They seemed to be walking faster and more methodically than before. And they were moving into the wind directly away from us. *That* was a good omen.

Presently we came across the fresh elephant droppings we had heard impacting with the ground. The spoor told us the two animals were together now. They were moving through the forest in a straight line, one behind the other. Both animals had defecated before moving off.

I kicked the top of one turd open and pressed the backs of my fingers onto the wet inner parts. It was piping hot. I took up the spoor myself. It was easy to follow.

The next time I stopped there was no sound coming from the elephants - no sound at all. They had either stopped or they were moving away from us faster than we were travelling on their spoor.

I concluded they must be walking very fast. I did not believe they had suddenly gone to ground; and I knew they had not smelt us. The wind was totally in our favour.

I moved to one side, indicating to Ben that he should follow the spoor again. He walked past me and, with his nose to ground, started to follow the very obvious sign. The two elephant bulls, walking one behind the other, had left a virtual highway for us to follow.

Twenty minutes later Ben stopped dead. He turned his head to the left, listening intently with his right ear. When he turned back to look at me he had a wide smile on his face. He lifted his right hand to his ear and fingered it, forcing it to flap gently. I got the message. He had heard the flapping of an elephant's ear. I listened and I too heard the same soft sounds - way off in the distance.

I looked at Ben and nodded my head in agreement. The elephants had at last gone to ground. They were at their siesta just a few hundred yards ahead of us.

We found them standing quietly under the wide and spreading branches of a very large Mchibi tree. The Mchibi - or False Teak - is a much bigger tree than the true teak tree and it is an evergreen. Teak is deciduous. The Mchibi also has much denser foliage. So elephants are prepared to walk the extra mile to enjoy the greater shade at midday during the hot summer months.

The undergrowth was much thinner beneath the Mchibi - the greater shade inhibiting understory plant growth. There was enough cover, however, to mask my close approach. The wind had not changed. It was blowing directly from the elephants to me, so getting up real close was not a problem.

Both elephants were slumbering deeply. They were standing alongside each other, head to tail, swaying gently back and forth. The extremities of their relaxed trunks were lying flat on the ground in front of them. Their heads were hanging from limp shoulders. Their ears were largely immobile - wafting automatically now and again. Their eyes were shut; their eyelids fluttering. They were completely relaxed and totally oblivious to our close proximity. Periodically, one or the other animal issued a heavy outflow of air through its trunk. A sigh of giant proportions! As before - the noise was

hollow, almost metallic.

They were both very big bulls. Big in body and heavy in tusk! The tusks were not long but they were very thick. Both jumbos were breathing stertorously, almost snoring, on their feet. The rich smell of the very fresh dung at their feet, and the cloying scent of musth - which was flowing copiously from their temporal glands, due to the heat, in long sweat-like dribbles - permeated the air all around.

Ben was at my side as I approached the closest animal. He had an open packet of spare ammunition in his left hand. With a silent gesture I told him to stay where he was - several yards behind me. He looked perplexed and a bit put out. There were already two fresh cartridges in his right hand, ready to pass on to me if I needed them. Today, however, I wanted to get in closer than just 10 yards range and I thought that Ben might be an impediment.

I looked back. Mbuyotsi and his native companion were standing watching us from a distance. I had told them to keep away until the hunt was over. The Bushman had his pea-shooter - the 9.3 - all ready for action.

At that moment the old hunter's adage flashed into my mind:

"Git as close as ye can, laddie," the old man had instructed his young elephant hunting protégé. ***"THEN GIT TEN YARDS CLOSER!"***

I had done my bit. I had come *the ten yards closer*.

At five yards, I looked up at the huge elephant bull standing right in front of me. He hadn't a clue that his nemesis was so close at hand. Slowly and quietly I manoeuvred myself into the right position - directly opposite the left-hand side of the elephant's head. I had long ago unlocked the safety catch on my rifle and had been ready to fire for some time. Outwardly I was calm. Inside my nerves were aflutter.

NB. When I conducted this hunt, I was still at the stage where I had not perfected the frontal brain shot. So I was desperately hoping that I would not be charged down by either of these bulls.

I drew an imaginary line between the elephant's ear hole and its eye. I

focussed my attention on the spot that was one third forward of the ear hole. I took aim and gently squeezed the trigger.

The rifle's report shattered the quiet somnolence of the forest. Instantly the stricken elephant's head jerked upwards - throwing its trunk skyward. Its front legs stiffened and its back legs collapsed. Its large brown eyes opened wide - staring into eternity. And its body started to fall towards me.

I felt, rather than saw, the huge animal's collision with the ground. It happened right alongside me. I heard the resonance of its ears as they bounced, once, up and down against its shoulder. I was vaguely conscious of the light brown cloud of dust that puffed up in the air from the dry granulated skin all over the elephant's body. Out of the corner of my eye I saw its upper back leg jerking in the air; and I heard the liquid articulation of its hip joint, with each kick of its huge hind leg.

All these things told me immediately that the elephant was dead. But my mind was not on the dead elephant. It had already re-focused on the living one.

The other elephant, shocked into instant wakefulness, without hesitating for a second, took off at the high port. It ran off for all it was worth in the direction it had been facing. Its head was bouncing, its ears pumping up and down, its legs stretching to the limit, its feet pounding the earth as fast as they were able.

I jacked a new round into the chamber, snapped the bolt shut and returned the rifle butt to my shoulder. The second elephant presented me with no easy side-head brain shot. Its head was moving - moving forwards as well as up and down - all at the same time. And all it gave me was an oblique, angled and moving shot at the brain.

I could see one of the elephant's cheekbones. I visualized where the bullet would impact had it been a side-head brain shot. I could see the top dead centre of its head from the side-rear. In my mind I could see the bullet - from a side-head shot - coursing upwards from its point of impact. And I dropped an imaginary line down through the centre of the animal's head. Common sense told me that the brain must lie where the two lines crossed.

To reach the brain, my bullet would have to impact at a point on the neck,

about one foot back from where the ear was attached to the head. I was not sure if my .375 bullet would penetrate the required distance. I had never taken this kind of shot before, nor had I ever seen Tim take a similar one.

I was not at all sure I should take it. If I bungled this shot I would have a wounded elephant on my hands. I would then have to report my stupidity to Malindela. I hesitated. Maybe I should just let this elephant run away?

But I had the foresight bead on target. The rear vee-sight was wrapped around it. My fanciful crossed lines were staring me in the face. The elephant was running away - putting ever greater distance between us. It was already beyond the 20 yards range. It was now or never. I squeezed the trigger.

The report rang loudly in my ears. I dropped the rifle from my shoulder and quickly pushed another round into the breech. I was already looking to punch a bullet into the escaping animal's lungs; and wondering if I should, instead, have a go at its spine or a hip-joint. I had never taken either one of these two crippling shots before, but Tim had carefully explained to me everything there was to know about them. The lungs, the spine and the hip-joint were the last ditch shots that a hunter could take to anchor a fleeing wounded elephant. Taking any one of them would be better than doing nothing!

During the flashing moment of time these thoughts raced through my mind, however, I realised that none of these shots would be necessary.

The instant my bullet impacted, all four of the elephants legs ceased to function. Running at full speed its whole body sagged. The toes of its front feet dug into the ground and this dragged its front legs under its chest. Its head was high, its tusks thrust forward, and its trunk hung limply beneath its face. And the huge beast did a nosedive into the ground. When it hit the sand, powdery dry dust erupted all over its body from the wrinkles of its rough textured skin.

And, as it was falling, I saw that its eyes were wide open. It was already staring into the hereafter. The elephant was dead before it even hit the ground. My bullet had found its mark!

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Bruce Austen didn't bat an eyelid when I told him about the three lions. He just nodded his head and commented: *"Good. Well done."*

Then I told him I had killed two crop raiding bull elephants as well.

Malindela looked up at me from behind his desk - silently. He held his steady gaze for a very long time. I could almost smell the machinations that were churning round and round in his brain. The atmosphere in the office at that moment was gravid with.... with I knew not what. But it wasn't very healthy. My elevated blood pressure pounded in my ears.

"Big Bulls?" he asked at last.

I nodded. *"I think... about 50 or 60 pounds a side. Both of them... both jumbos that is!"* I was still not, at that stage, very sure about estimating ivory weights.

"Have any trouble?"

"No! Two brain shots - two bulls. One after the other," I said, feeling rather proud of myself.

"The second one was running away then?" Bruce knew the ropes. He had done the same thing many times himself.

"Yes!" I no longer had a smile on my face.

"But you took the second shot anyway?"

"Yes... I was sure I could hit the brain - and I did!"

Bruce again looked at me in silence - for another long period. And in all that time I stood to attention in front of his desk. His face was deadpan - non-committal. I looked back at him with apparent total composure. I tried to give the impression that I was non-repentant - that I believed I had made the right decision to shoot these two elephants; and that I was satisfied with my performance. But inside I was shaking like a leaf in a storm.

For some time, our eyes met and our spirits sparred.

The boss man was mulling over what next to say. I could feel his thoughts tangibly in the pregnant atmosphere. *Should he reprimand me? Should he praise me?*

“What arrangements did you make for the collection of the ivory?”

‘He’s cuffed it’, I thought happily. *‘He’s avoiding the issue.’* That was a good omen!

“Headman Mazai will be taking care of all that,” I said with not a little relief.

“O.K.,” he said finally. *“Well done. Be sure to record the kills in the station register.”*

I escaped from Bruce Austen’s office that morning with a smile on my face that was as big as an ocean. I was walking on Cloud Nine. He had given me his unspoken approval - if somewhat hesitantly - regarding my decision to hunt the two crop-raiding elephant bulls at Ngamo.

The gates of my big game hunting career stood wide open. From that day onwards Malindela was to increasingly trust me and my instincts. He sent me out on my own, hunting elephants, buffaloes and lions, anywhere and everywhere; and I never again hunted in Tim’s Braybrooke’s shadow.

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Footnote: The word *saba* in south-central African languages means both *fear* and *respect*. In the African psyche both these interpretations mean one and the same thing. It can be said, therefore, that the native labourers, and the Bushmen trackers, of Hwange National Park *saba-ed* Malindela. They respected him, feared him and loved him, all at the same time. They loved him because although he was a strict disciplinarian he always looked after their interests.

Bruce Austen spoke Tswana - the language of the people of Botswana - like a native; and he spoke Si-Ndebele - the language of the Ndebele people - pretty well, too. So when Bruce spoke to his native staff, he used their own language and nothing much was missed by his inquiring mind. It was this trait that earned him his African *honour-name* - *Malindela: The One who follows* - for when he began investigating an issue he was like a dog with a bone. He followed every lead until he found the truth.

From this you will gather that you cannot interpret a white man’s African honour-name literally. To understand its meaning you have to understand the

roots of its origin.

Malindela had his finger on the pulse of Hwange all the time - which is what made him such a fine administrator; and he achieved this feat by using the native staff at Main Camp as his main source of intelligence. So he not only used his own observations to determine the quality of the white officers under his command, he also dug deep into the opinions of his Ndebele and Bushman staff.

I have already indicated that Bruce interrogated the Bushmen who led the horse patrols, regarding the performances of the young white game rangers who had accompanied them. He did the same thing every time a new youngster carried out a problem animal control exercise. And he continued to investigate them until he was certain that he had an accurate measure of their intrinsic qualities. Consequently, he was able to properly guide and mould the characters of the young men that fell under his command - which is what made him such a great leader of men.

I know of no one - black, brown or white - who did not *saba* Bruce Austen!

I am quite sure, therefore, that after I hunted the three stock-killing lions and the two crop raiding elephant bulls at Ngamo, that Bruce summonsed Mbuyotsi into his office for the customary interrogation. But I wasn't worried because his purpose was understandable and acceptable to me, and wholly benign. If that interrogation ever took place, however, I never knew about it. Mbuyotsi never volunteered a single word.

Bruce never said another word to me about that Ngamo exercise. It seemed I had earned my stripes - at last – which indicated that Mbuyotsi must have given my big boss a satisfactory report.

I was grateful for this because it was an indication of the growing rapport I was establishing with Main Camp's Bushman trackers. I never curried favour with them to influence their opinions. That was not in my character; and it was not necessary either, because the respect we developed for each other was mutual and based upon our respective performances and interactions.

Nevertheless, outwardly, I always maintained a master-servant relationship between me and my trackers. It was expected of a white man in colonial

Africa and I was a product of my historical circumstances. But that did not stop my trackers and me from being friends of the highest order. We *had* to be friends because we were forever holding each other's lives in our respective hands.

This love and respect will be further illustrated in later volumes of this mini-book series.

After that Ngamo patrol my life as a big game hunting game ranger began in earnest. What I did not at first know, however, was that my actual big game hunting training had come to an end. From then on I was *on my own*. There were huge gaps in my capabilities and this I acknowledged, but I was going have to *fill in those gaps* on my own - with the help, of course, of my Bushman trackers.

My life's real big game hunting journey had begun!