

A Hunter's Tales . . .

A Hunter's Trails



Ron Thomson

Volume 11

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)**

Capture-Hunting the Black Rhinoceros

In 1964, at age 24, I was a newly married senior game ranger in the Rhodesian (now Zimbabwean) Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management. At the beginning of that year I was appointed the officer-in-charge of the Binga District in the middle Zambezi Valley. I was responsible for a square-shaped block of land 5000 square miles in extent, located on the southern shoreline along the upper reaches of Lake Kariba.

The national parks element of the Binga district's administration in those days was a one-man station, but I was not altogether alone. I had a staff complement of 10 uniformed native game scouts who patrolled the district - searching for poachers and reporting back to me the circumstances of any wild animals that they encountered.

There were two game reserves in the district - Chete and Chizarira - both 500 square miles in extent. They were, ostensibly, my chief responsibilities.

Lake Kariba, however, had filled to capacity for the first time in 1963 - just one year previously - and the rising waters of the lake had displaced 57 000 primitive Batonka tribespeople. They had, perforce, to find new places to live in the hinterland, away from what was a predominantly inhospitable rocky lake shore.

Half of these people moved north into Zambia. The remainder elected to stay in Southern Rhodesia, of which 14 000 settled in the Binga area. The land outside the two game reserves was designated 'tribal trust land' on which the Batonka lived; and they built their new villages - comprising pole-and-mud huts with badly thatched roofs - close to all the springs and river pools which, for countless centuries, had been the sole preserves of the Zambezi Valley's wild animals.

Hundreds of thousands of wild animals were also forced to relocate from the lake basin; and they joined the resident animals in the hinterland - adding to the burden that had been placed on the limited numbers of water holes; and the local habitats. The conflict that occurred between man and wild beast, therefore, was enormous.

At the time - having so recently been transferred from Hwange National Park - I assessed the densities of big game animals that were living amongst the Batonka villages, as being similar to those which occurred in Hwange which was a major big game viewing tourist destination.

I, therefore, found that, instead of working in my completely virgin game reserves, I spent most days of the week in the tribal lands, hunting crop-raiding elephants and buffaloes, or shooting lions and leopards that killed and ate the people's scrawny goats and cattle; and sometimes people, too. During my first year at Binga, for example, I hunted down and killed over 600 elephants!

The Rhodesian government felt a compelling need to assist with the Batonka resettlement programme after the people's rough eviction from the fertile banks of the Zambezi River; and there was a large contingent of Department of Internal Affairs officers - headed by a District Commissioner (D.C.) - whose task it was to look after the interests of the tribespeople.

One of the promises made to the Batonka when they vacated the great river basin, was that those who wanted to move back to the lake shore - to take up commercial fishing - would be allowed to do so. Sizemba was one of the areas earmarked for this relocation exercise. The Batonka, however, refused to move because they feared the potential crop-raiding depredations of Sizemba's large elephant and buffalo herds and, particularly, the presence of the many cantankerous and dangerous black rhinos that lived in the area's 'jesse' (dense thickets).

It was decided, therefore, to catch the black rhinos at Sizemba and relocate them to Hwange National Park - 300 miles away to the south west. The last

of the few rhinos that had survived the commercial slaughter of elephants and rhinos - that had taken place in the Hwange region during the 19th Century - had been finally eliminated by itinerant hunters 40 years previously.

The Sizemba black rhino capture exercise, therefore, became a restocking programme for Hwange National Park. And it pre-empted a seven-year period during which I caught vulnerable and remnant black rhino populations in many tribal trust lands throughout the country - where they were being poached (for meat); and I relocated them into the comparative safety of several Rhodesian national parks.

Rupert Fothergill, who had led the five-year long Operation Noah exercise on Lake Kariba - catching and relocating all types of animals that had been marooned on temporary islands formed by the rising waters of the new lake - was tasked to catch the black rhinos at Sizemba; and I was instructed to assist him.

It became my job, therefore, to prepare for this exercise. I was required to construct two mopani pole stockades - in which the captured rhinos would be housed. I built them exactly according to the specifications given to me by my immediate superior - Provincial Game Warden, John Tebbit. His office was in Bulawayo city, 300 miles away to the south, so he was unable to provide me with any tangible assistance.

***NB:** Because John Tebbit's Christian names were 'John Charles', he was affectionately known by his game ranger subordinates as 'J.C.' – or 'The Holy Ghost'*

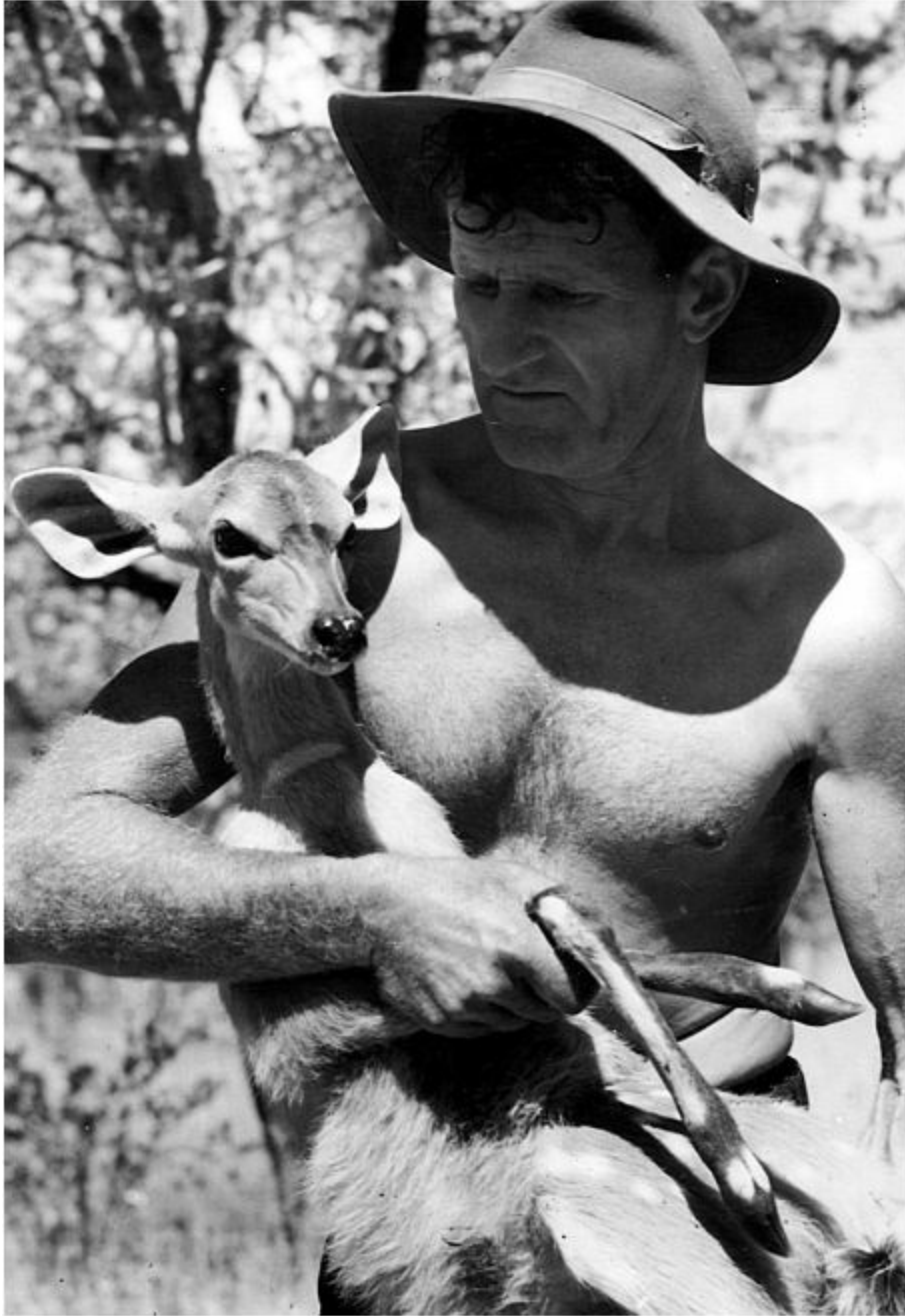
The holding pens that I built were located alongside the D.C.'s patrol cottage at Sizemba - which had been made available to the officers of the capture team for the duration of the exercise.

Once the pens had been constructed, we were ready to begin.

Rupert arrived late one afternoon, unannounced and ten days behind schedule, in his recently acquired Jeep Cherokee. This was a new '*species of Land Rover*' for me. And was it swank! It looked more like a city station wagon than a rough, bush, 4x4; and I wondered if I would ever be able to afford such a vehicle!

This was the first time that I met Rupert Fothergill. He was in his 50s, tall, with a long, clean shaven, angular face. He was lean and hungry-looking and appeared to be as fit as a fiddle. By nature, however, he was decidedly taciturn.

Throughout that first evening Rupert never once smiled. And he completely ignored many of the several questions that I fired at him - to the point of being rude! I wondered how I was ever going to get along with such a discourteous and uncommunicative man. And I was very conscious of the fact that we would be isolated in the very remote Sizemba bush for many, many months.



Rupert Fothergill. Operation Noah, 1962.

Rupert had been delayed in Salisbury because the manufacture of the set of two roller ramps that he had ordered took longer than expected, and he was not prepared to start the capture operation without them.

NB: *I was soon to discover that those roller ramps were absolutely critical for our purpose. They were hooked into the hinge spaces of the dropped tail gate on my station's 5-ton Bedford lorry. They formed two ramps (each with twenty rollers that were carried on smooth running bearings). Using the roller ramps, a sleigh (with a comatose rhino strapped on board with sisal ropes) could be easily winched onto the back of the lorry. The roller ramps were also used to gently offload the rhino, still on the sleigh, directly into the pen.*

Rupert approved the nature of the pens' construction but not their dimensions. Each pen should have been at least twice the size, 20 feet by 10 feet, he told me; not 10 x 10. So J.C.'s measurements had been incorrect! We would use one of the pens for the first rhino that we caught, Rupert said, but thereafter we would have to build new and larger pens for all future captures.

That first night Rupert stripped and cleaned his capture weapons and darts, and he prepared the drugs that he would use in the morning. The weapons' trade name was: *Palmer Cap-Chur Gun* and they propelled the long half-inch thick aluminium darts with compressed CO₂. I watched him, fascinated.

NB: *The Cap-Chur gun might be likened to the modern day paintball gun. Both are fired using compressed carbon dioxide. The main difference is the fact that the dart that we used was infinitely heavier than the paintball pellet.*

Siamweri (one of the D.C.'s right hand men at Sizemba) and Ben - my own Bushman tracker - had found the spoor of a single rhino not too far from camp. The amount of sign suggested that the animal was in the vicinity on a pretty regular basis. Rupert wanted to have a go at it in the morning. He was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet!

The veteran game warden had brought three Shona trackers with him: Langton, Kadikidiki and Josepha. The fact that he had brought *three* told me that he expected to be doing an awful lot of tracking. All three of these men

had worked with Rupert for many years.

* * *

The crack of dawn found us following the fresh spoor of what Rupert said was a very large black rhino bull. It had wandered around a fallow Batonka cropland during the night, eating the stalks of dry forbs (annual weeds) from the previous year's rains. *Yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's* spoor was an apt description for the melee of tracks we were required to unravel.

By the middle of the afternoon we still had not located our quarry. We had discovered where it had lain down in some thick bush during the heat of the day, in the deep shade of a small jackal-berry tree. From there it had wandered about, its tracks going round and round in circles, criss-crossing randomly, all over the place.

We found ourselves in a drainage basin where the rhino had fed for a long time on a clump of green-leafed acacia thorn bushes. Once again there were tracks everywhere. Rupert, carefully holding the long dart in a vertical position, sat down on the ground next to me and we waited for our legion of trackers to interpret the story of the spoor.

NB: *I was to find out in the weeks ahead why it was necessary for the dart to always be held in that vertical position. (I will explain this in a later mini-book).*

Ben disappeared. Sometime later I saw him on the slopes of the mopani/jesse woodland on the far side of the basin. Having tired of trying to unscramble the tangle of sign, he had left the other trackers and conducted a lone 360-degree search around the perimeter of the basin. He was looking for the outgoing spoor. I left him to it. He knew what he was doing.

Presently I heard Ben's call - the doleful whistle of a lost guineafowl. He had found the outgoing spoor. He had cut the proverbial *Gordian Knot*.

When we caught up with him, we discovered that not only had Ben found the tracks we had all been looking for he had found the rhino too.

Nonchalantly, he pointed into the woodland in front of him. There stood the rhino. What a roller coaster of a journey that animal had taken us on!

The mopani woodland was well established on the gently sloping hill. There was some light jesse under the trees. A thick carpet of dry and discarded mopani and jesse leaves covered the ground. Here and there was a sprinkling of *Kannie-dood* trees (*Commiphora* trees) with their smooth grey-white trunks.

I will never forget my first sight of that rhino. It was standing facing three-quarters away from us, the fore part of its body directed to the far left. Its head was turned and it was looking back over its left shoulder. Its left ear was erect and immobile, facing back in our direction. The rhino moved not a muscle. I was awestruck by its huge, thick neck and by the aura of hostility that pervaded the animal's presence. It looked like a giant - prehistoric - fat - menacing - pig standing there, absolutely still - looking for trouble - 100 yards away up the slope.

"It's heard us," Rupert warned immediately in a soft undertone. *"I want you people",* and he eyed us all, *"to stop walking about amongst these dry leaves. Just stand - perfectly still - where you are right now. No talking. No whispering. Look for a tree that you can climb... just in case it charges."*

Only then did Rupert load the dart into the Cap-Chur gun. This was quite a performance. It required that the bolt action be dismantled and removed completely so that the half-inch thick, heavy, 12-inch long dart could be inserted into the weapon's barrel from the rear. The bolt then had to be re-assembled behind the dart and pushed home to complete the exercise.

NB: *The Palmer Cap-Chur Gun was designed for the capture of stray dogs that were roaming the streets of America's large cities. The breech slot, therefore, was only large enough to accommodate a one-inch-long dart, the drug capacity of which was sufficient to immobilise a large dog. To enable our big rhino darts to be inserted into the*

weapon, therefore, required that the entire bolt action be removed; and then re-assembled behind the dart.

I took my .458 Magnum from Ben and checked the safety catch. Rupert looked at me askance.

“You are not to fire that thing,” he said to me with some authority.

“Even if the rhino gets you down...?”

“Even if the rhino gets me down,” Rupert confirmed. *“We have come here to catch rhinos, not to kill them.”*

“But...”

“No buts, Ron. I don’t want you shooting this rhino, or any other rhino... no matter what!”

I thought that instruction was a bit *over the top*. If the rhino did get him down I would most certainly shoot it regardless of what he said. I was not about to allow his death to become part of my conscience. But I let his comments pass. This was not the time to argue.

Rupert and his principal tracker, Langton, walked slowly and carefully towards the rhino. Rupert used his tiny ash bag constantly, testing the wind. Fluffy puffs of white wood ash periodically floated away from his body, drifting to the right and settling on the ground behind him. So the wind was O.K! Despite their attempts to walk silently, however, I heard every step that both Rupert and Langton took. I was sure the rhino had heard them, too. Still, the animal did not move.

NB: *The tube of the dart which Rupert had loaded that morning was fully 12 inches long. It had an aluminium head with a two-inch long steel, barbed needle on the front. There was a bright red, fluffy, pom-*

pom-like woollen tail flight at the back. Full of immobilising fluid, the dart was ponderous. It weighed the same as a handful of .458 Magnum cartridges. Because it was propelled by compressed carbon-dioxide gas, the heavy dart had an absolute maximum range of only 25 yards. That was why Rupert had said that, to make sure of a hit, he had to approach to within 10 or 15 yards of his target.

The rhino continued to stand absolutely still. It watched and listened as Rupert slowly drew closer. At 30 yards Langton stopped next to a *Commiphora* tree that he knew he could climb. From that point on Rupert continued alone, moving quietly, inexorably, towards his quarry.

The rhino remained immobile - still watching obliquely - still listening.

I surmised that it had no idea *what* Rupert was. It had heard him, yes, definitely. At 20 yards, viewed through a backward-glancing left eye, Rupert's body would have perhaps looked like a fuzzy animal in the sparse and leafless jesse. Black rhinos do not have good daytime vision!

The rhino had had no hostile contacts with humans, so it was seemingly more curious than concerned by Rupert's approach. It was a huge and very strong animal. By comparison, the game warden was puny. And because Rupert had approached it from downwind it had not caught his scent.



To be safe from a black rhino all you have to do is climb a tree and get six feet above the ground. But you have to find the tree and get up it before you are safe.

Photo by: Hans Hansen.

The unfolding scenario amazed and fascinated me. The rhino clearly knew that Rupert was approaching from behind, yet it didn't move away! I stood and watched in wonderment. My nerve ends, however, were on fire. This was a form of hunting that I had never before witnessed.

At 10 yards range Rupert stopped. In one slick movement, he lifted his Cap-Chur gun, took aim, and fired a dart into the rhino's left buttock. The noise the rifle made was minimal... merely a very soft *phlaatttt*.

All hell broke loose.

The rhino spun round with a loud *whoosh*, and it flew into an instant, full-blown charge, galloping fast and furiously directly towards Rupert. As it bounded forward, every time its front feet hit the ground, it loudly exhaled air from its nostrils in short stertorous emissions: *pfussss... pfussss... pfussss*. The sound and the visual effects were terrifying. I clutched my .458 Magnum tightly.

Rupert dropped his weapon the moment he had fired it. He spun on the balls of his feet and raced back towards Langton. The rhino was right on his heels. By the time he reached Langton's tree, the tracker was up in its middle branches. Rupert tried to scramble into the lower branches of the same tree, but the rhino was already upon him. I watched in horror. I was about to witness the illustrious and famous Rupert Fothergill being gored to death by a black rhino! There was no way that that rhino was not going to nail the old game warden onto the tree trunk with its long front horn.

The butt of my .458 Magnum was at my shoulder. The safety catch was off and I had the sights focused on the rhino's brain. My forefinger was brushing the trigger. My heart was beating like a drum.

As Rupert scrambled onto the bottom branch, Langton's big hand reached down. His fingers grabbed at Rupert's belt in the small of his back and, taking hold, he unceremoniously yanked the old man into the air. Rupert was catapulted onto a higher branch to which he clung desperately. There he slipped and slid around on the smooth grey bark. And all the while Langton hung onto him.

Below them, mere inches from Rupert's dangling feet, the rhino stood and peered up at him. It repeatedly thrust its long front horn at his flailing limbs. His legs were scrabbling about - wagging wildly - as he desperately tried to secure a position for his feet on the smooth and slippery branches. Langton hung onto his belt for dear life.

The rhino continued to blow hot and angry air up at him through its nostrils. Its front legs - and shoulders - bounced up and down every time it thrust upwards with its long and sharp-pointed front horn.

As the rhino lifted its head we saw the natural but livid six-inch-wide ulcerous-looking erosion wound on its chest. It appeared cancerous and added to the rhino's overall malignant presence.

NB: *Rhodesian black rhinos all have these fist-sized erosion sores on their chests. The black rhinos of South Africa have additional lesions on either side of their middle-bodies immediately behind their shoulders. Nobody knows the function or purpose of these wounds but it is known that the disease organism that causes them is transmitted by tiny biting flies that can be seen invading the affected areas all day long.*

Then, just as suddenly, and just as unexpectedly as the attack had begun, it ended. The big rhino bull turned and galloped off up the hill. Soon it changed its gait to a triple, and the immaculate silence that surrounded us was interrupted by the regular and retreating beat of the rhino's feet on the ground: *pomm... pomm... pomm... pomm....*

It disappeared over crest of the hill.

Only then did Langton release his hold on Rupert's belt and the game warden dropped 10 feet onto the ground. I saw him falling. I heard the thump of his feet as they hit the gravelly soil. His body folded and he rolled over into a drift of dried leaves.

Then both Rupert and Langton began to laugh, and the tracker descended from his lofty perch.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief. Thank God Langton was a big, strong Shona man. If he had been of lesser stature, like Ben, he would not have been able to haul Rupert up that tree so effortlessly.

Langton went off up the slope to retrieve the Cap-Chur gun and Rupert walked down the hill towards me. He had a grin on his face like a Cheshire cat.

“*Got it!*” he exclaimed happily. “*In the buttocks... and the dart ‘stuck’.*”

That was the first time I had ever heard that expression. It was a term, however, with which I was soon to become very familiar: *The dart had ‘stuck’* - meaning that it had become firmly embedded in the animal’s muscle. But at that moment my mind was occupied with other, more dramatic thoughts.

Fucking hell, I was thinking. This man is fucking mad in the head. It was my utter shock that brought these vulgar expletives to the fore. First he tells me that I can’t shoot the rhino, even if it has got him down and is goring him. Then he makes a big joke of his acutely dangerous experience.

At that moment I had grave doubts about me integrating with Rupert Fothergill’s rhino capture team. I had long ago discarded all bravado when hunting dangerous game. I had had far too many near-death experiences already. I was then only 24 years old and here we had a man 30 years my senior, who was behaving like a bloody schoolboy!

NB: *With Rupert Fothergill and I living and working at close quarters in the months that followed, it did not take me long to better understand the man, and to realise that my early criticism of him was unfounded. We became firm friends and he taught me everything that he knew about black rhinos and their capture.*

* * *

The day’s hunt was not yet over!

The rhino had run off with the dart in its rump. The immobilising drug was, at that very moment, coursing through its bloodstream. It would gradually bring on a state of complete narcosis. The dose was one full gram of clinically pure morphine sulphate mixed with several heavy tranquillizers. This combination, which Rupert called a *cocktail* - would bring the rhino to its knees in about 30 minutes. But, in that time the darted and ever more frightened animal would be running flat out to God knows where.

How far can a rhino run in 30 minutes? And how and to where will it run?

Finding a darted rhino

The second phase of the hunt was about to begin: tracking the darted rhino! I told Ben how important it was for us to find this animal quickly and he pulled out all the stops.

Rupert's three trackers immediately assumed the dominant tracking role, but it was not long before they submitted to the Bushman's superior skills. Realising this, I smiled contentedly to myself. And from that first hunt onwards, throughout all the black rhino capture operations that I was involved with over the next seven years Ben was always acknowledged as the best and principal tracker whenever conditions got tough.

At first the rhino ran hard and fast over the hills and down through the dales. As the morphine slowly took effect, however, its route became ever more erratic. Very soon the trackers were unable to rely on the rhino following *the line of least resistance* through the bush. In that very broken country the animal moved about in *every* direction, climbing over rocks and ploughing straight through bushes that it would normally have avoided. It must have been in that semi-drugged state for at least fifteen minutes before it finally collapsed.

The tracking became slow - methodical - as conditions worsened.

The afternoon wore on. The light faded. Day turned to dusk. At that point, the

tracks indicated that the rhino was staggering about in very rough terrain. Soon it was too dark for the trackers to see the spoor.

Everybody knew, by the state of the meandering pattern of its tracks, however, that the rhino was *down* - down-and-out - somewhere thereabouts. Somewhere *very close!*

Rupert was beside himself with worry. He didn't want to lose this rhino now. It would not die from the drugs it had received, he said, but it would be alone and comatose all night long if we didn't find it within the next few minutes. It would then be totally at the mercy of every passing hyena.

Kadikidiki literally stumbled over it. Unknowingly, we had had it surrounded for several minutes. It had been right under our noses all the time! The dart was still stuck in the rhino's left buttock.

The tracker immediately pulled on the dart and ripped out its barbed needle from the animal's rump. It was bent at right angles to the dart, the damage having been caused by the rhino running through thick bush in its flight.

It was lying on its back with its feet in the air, so Kadikidiki immediately named it *Chakadama* – *He who lies on the ground with his feet in the air*. Having been thus christened, the rhino assumed a personality in our minds. Chakadama could then not be referred as an 'it'. It had, perforce, to be *he* or *him*.

The taming of Chakadama

Siamweri and Josepha hurried back to camp in the crepuscular light of the dying day, to summons the lorry.

Fortunately, the cottage was not too far away but our 20 new labourers, in the lorry's headlights, had to cut a bush-track through the mopani trees and the jesse to reach the comatose Chakadama. The lorry took 90 minutes to reach us, by which time the night was pitch black.

* * *

Chakadama was an extremely large bull. Of all the animals that I captured in later years, very few were of comparable size; and there was only one that I could say for sure was bigger. His neck was enormous. His front horn was thick at the base, narrow and pointed at the tip, 30 inches long, and polished to a shiny black. The posterior horn stood tall and erect behind it, looking like burnished ebony from long use.

***NB:** Black rhinos, being stick eaters, use their front horns to hook, and to pull down branches from higher up the trees and bushes that they feed upon. And when the lowered branch can be sandwiched in the space between the front and the back horns, a quick twist of the head snaps the branch in two. This is why both sides of both black rhino horns are worn uniformly smooth; and why they become polished and blackened with age.*

Black rhino cow horns - back and front - tend to be longer and thinner than those of bulls.

White rhinos rarely have the same kind of horn wear - nor the same quality of polish - because they are grass eaters and don't use their horns for feeding.

Both black and white rhinos attain maximum horn length at about twelve years of age. Thereafter, the horns become shorter and thicker with age. Few black rhinos exceed an age of 30 years in the wild.

When I looked at Chakadama in the failing light that evening, I was in awe. His sheer mass exuded power and strength. I had never imagined that a wild animal could hold me in such an hypnotic spell.

We all pushed and pulled, and we rolled Chakadama onto his side. Langton and Kadikidiki secured his two front feet together with a half-inch thick sisal scout rope. Then they tied the two hind feet in the same fashion.

NB: The scout ropes were about five feet long with one end spliced into a loop. At the beginning of the operation, each of the four trackers carried a single rope tied in a neat hank that hung from his leather belt at the back. Later they each carried two ropes.

When the front and hind legs were independently secured, Langton used a third rope to pull all four feet together. This trussed up the rhino like a Christmas turkey. There was then no chance of him getting up and running away.



First the front feet, then the hind feet are tied together with a scout rope.



Finally, all four feet are tied together with a third scout rope.

After Chakadama was thus secured, everybody went out into the starlit darkness to collect firewood for a signal fire. Rupert indicated that such a fiery beacon would help the lorry to find us in the darkness.

After that it was too dark to do anything other than sit around and wait for the lorry. We bided our time patiently - silently - contemplating the stars and listening to the myriad sounds of the African night.

The rhino lay on his side breathing stertorously. Periodically he took a very deep breath which he held for an excruciatingly long time. Then he exhaled in one big sigh. I believed his stultified breathing was cause for alarm - but Rupert appeared unconcerned. The rhino's body was all the time shaking, too, like that of a person with advanced malaria fever. To the touch, Chakadama's skin was hot and he was sweating profusely. His body was shrouded in a strange odour quite unknown to me. It was the pungent scent of warm, black rhino sweat.

"His breathing is fine," Rupert assured me. "And, before you ask me, that shudder in his body is quite normal. It is his reaction to the immobilising

drugs and the tranquilliser. You will soon learn to distinguish the difference between a properly drugged and safe rhino, Ron, and one that is in distress. I will tell you what I can about the drugs and their effects on rhinos as and when we catch more."

I found this instruction both refreshing and informative. I was surprised that it had come so voluntarily from a man I had known for barely 24 hours and who had, thus far, indicated that he was uncommunicative and aloof. I still had much to learn about Rupert Fothergill!

"We may have to wait a long time for the lorry to arrive," Rupert continued, "so I think I might as well warn you, now, about some of the problems we sometimes encounter. First - when we have to wait a long time for the recovery lorry to arrive - if we are not careful - the rhino may suffer from what is called 'lateral paralysis'. That happens when a rhino lies on one side for too long. The weight of its heavy body crimps the nerves in its bottom shoulder which causes paralysis in that limb. And once the paralysis sets in it is incurable. So, if we are forced to wait here for more than an hour, we will have to turn our rhino over."

Thus it was, therefore, that we turned Chakamadama over half an hour later - from his left side to his right side - to pre-empt the onset of paralysis.

An hour later we heard the lorry's engine in the distance. Periodically, there were sweeping arcs of light in the sky - from its headlights - as it manoeuvred its way through the broken terrain and up and down the hills. There were also the faint sounds of wood chopping as the labour force cleared a roadway through the trees and heavy undergrowth.

Half an hour later we turned the rhino over again. He struggled with the disturbance but quickly settled down. I continued to be very conscious of his unnatural breathing rhythms.

"The dose of morphine we gave him today," Rupert offered spontaneously, "will keep him down, safely, for about 12 hours. We don't have to worry

about the drugs...only the lateral paralysis. But now that we've turned him over, again, we shouldn't experience any trouble even with that."

The lorry slowly advanced towards us. The trackers prepared the signal fire at a safe distance from the rhino, and in no time at all its blaze lit up the night sky. Soon they had the fire roaring - a glorious beacon that would provide the driver, Shereni, with a point to which he could aim his lorry.

The vehicle finally arrived and Langton, Joseph and Kadikidiki - who knew exactly what was required - instructed Shereni to manoeuvre it into the correct position close to the rhino. Rupert did not interfere.

The 20 labourers came over and examined the sleeping rhino in the light of the bonfire. There was a lot of subdued yet excited conversation because the local Batonka had seen nothing like this before. Rupert's trackers gave them a few minutes to satisfy their curiosity, then they directed the men to prepare for the rhino's recovery from the field.

I lent a hand where I could, conscious of the fact, however, that I had yet a lot to learn about the procedures.

The sleigh was pulled off the lorry and placed on the ground next to the rhino. The heavy roller-ramps were hauled off the decking. Their upper brackets were slotted into the gaps between the hinges of the open tailgate; and their *feet* (the bottom ends of the rollers) were properly positioned on the ground behind the vehicle. The manual winches were fixed to the lorry's superstructure behind the cab.

Rupert supervised the positioning of the sleigh alongside Chakadama. Everybody helped to roll him over again, this time onto the sleigh. As before, he resisted the movement, and he tried to hook the people around him with his long front horn. Everyone near the animal's head, therefore, was forewarned about the potential danger.

Long ropes had been fastened under and around the sleigh decking. When

the rhino was in position on the wooden platform, he was tied with these ropes to the sleigh itself.

The hook at the end of the winch cable was secured to a looped cable on the front of the sleigh; and the slow process of winching the rhino onto the lorry began. We also attached a two-inch-thick tug-o'-war rope to the front of the sleigh, and the labour gang hauled on it to expedite the process.

For the first time I saw the vital function of those magical roller ramps. The two mopani pole skids on the sled ran over the revolving rollers smoothly and easily all the way up to the back of the lorry. The sleigh was then pushed and pulled manually onto the decking.



A rhino trussed up and roped to its sleigh, ready for loading. Note the long securing ropes that pass under the sleigh and over the top of the rhino.



No matter how much we improved our performance, it was always a battle to wrestle the rhino onto its sleigh after darting. Sizemba, 1964.



Loading the sleigh, with its rhino on board, onto the lorry – hand winching and manually pulling and pushing. Note the roller ramps in use here. Sizemba 1964.

After the loading, the roller-ramps were lifted and laid out, one on each side of the sleigh on the back of the lorry. The 20 men, four trackers and Siamweri, added their shovels and axes to the katoonda (working accoutrements) and they climbed on board; some standing, some squatting, and some sitting, all around the sleeping rhino. I climbed onto the back with

them. Rupert sat in the passenger seat next to Shereni.

* * *

It took half an hour to get back to camp. No sooner had we arrived than all the paraffin Tilley lamps, and all the paraffin storm lanterns in camp were commandeered, and they were held up by various people surrounding the lorry. My wife, Babs, came out to witness the great event.

The lorry was reversed up against the pen's open gateway, which had been prepared the previous day for just such a captured rhino's reception.

The rollers were taken off the lorry and fastened to the tailgate once again. Their feet, this time, were located just *inside* the pen. The loading process was then applied in reverse and the sleigh, with its rhino passenger on board, was slowly guided down the ramps directly into the pen. Once the bottom ends of the sled skids had touched the ground, the sleigh ropes were untied and the rhino was manhandled onto the ground by pulling, sliding and rolling the animal off the sleigh.

In spite of still having his feet trussed, and being heavily drugged, Chakadama made brave, but ineffectual attempts to fight us at every turn. We just had to be careful of his constantly thrusting front horn.

Rupert and I were inside the pen with him. The game warden's portable drug pack was lying open on the ground nearby. The final stage of Chakadama's capture was about to begin.

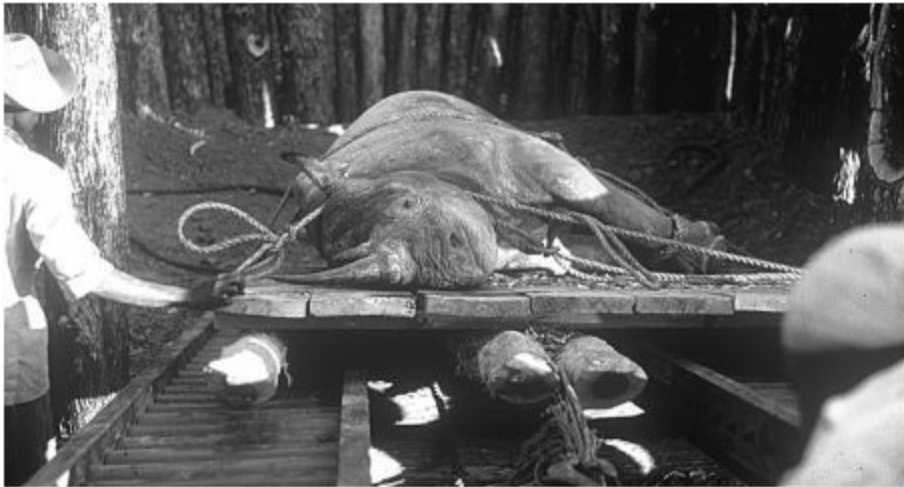
Upon Langton's orders, Shereni drove the lorry away from the open gateway, dragging the roller ramps, still attached, behind it. The winch cable held the now empty sleigh, in place, on top of the roller-ramps.

With the entrance to the pen thus cleared, Langton and Josepha, with autocratic efficiency, climbed onto the tall pole wall and ordered the gate poles to be handed to them one at a time.

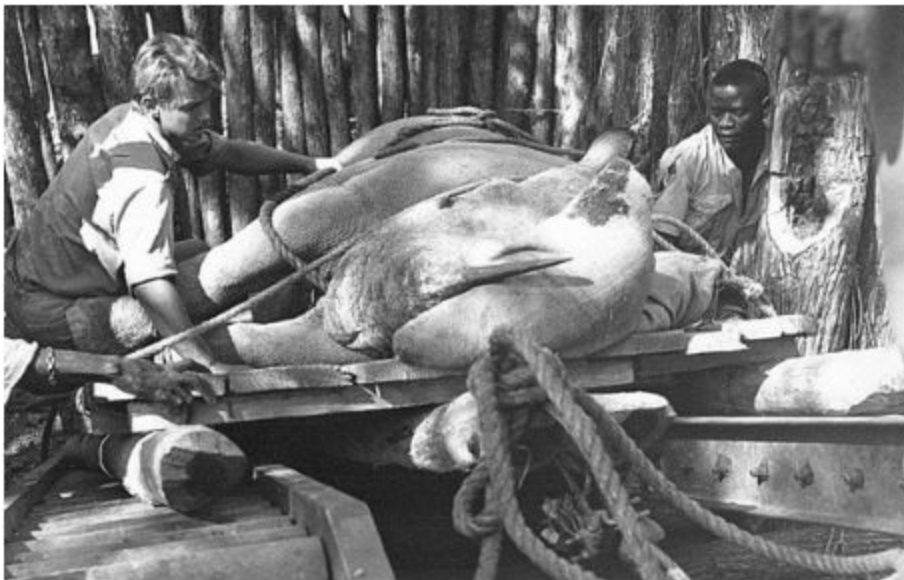
Along the top and bottom of the gateway two parallel poles were fixed, with enough space between them to accommodate the gate's twenty-odd vertical

poles. These were dropped, *most* of them top-of-pole downwards, through the upper slot, with their ends fitting tightly into the lower one.

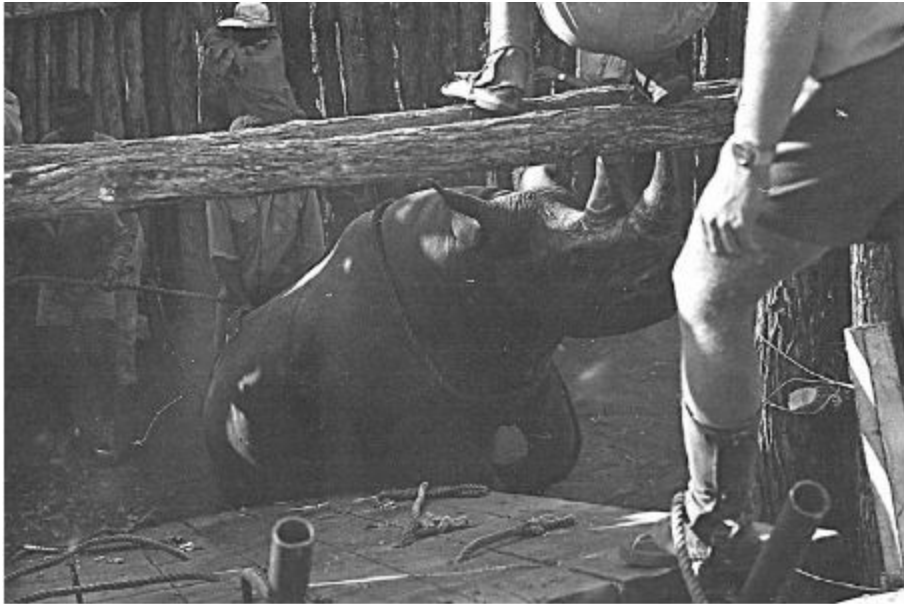
When the gate appeared to be firmly closed, the men pushed yet more poles into the pack and, with the flat, back ends of felling axes, they hammered them down into the already dense mass of wooden columns. Even when it seemed the gate-pack could not possibly accept another - one at a time - yet more poles were pushed in and hammered home. Finally, the gate was closed solid; and I wondered how Langton was ever going to get any of those poles out again.



The offloading procedure is a reversal of the loading one. Here a newly captured rhino is lowered on its sleigh directly into the pen.



The author and driver Shereni, guiding a newly captured rhino down directly into the offloading pen. They are preparing to untie the sleigh ropes.



When the rhino is dragged, slid and rolled off its sleigh onto the pen floor, it often wakes up. There is a good chance of someone getting injured at this time.

Whilst the gate was being shut, Rupert and I remained inside the pen working on the rhino. In the light of a paraffin Tilley lamp, we examined the animal's body minutely. His right ear was folded over the side of his head, and upon closer inspection we discovered a massive wound running along the underside of the ear. It was an obvious rhino horn wound that had penetrated to the bone at the back of Chakadama's skull. It was weeping pus copiously. There were yet other, more recent, horn scars about his forehead, face and neck. These were all fighting wounds quite unlike the natural erosion patch on his chest. Rupert concluded the obvious: that Chakadama had been in a serious fight with another bull rhino.

***NB:** Several years later, when I had determined the ecological puzzle surrounding black rhino behaviour, I understood that Rupert had been right. Chakadama had been recently defeated in a fierce territorial fight. The fact that he was alone up in the hill country, where we normally only found the odd nomadic cow with a new baby, confirmed this interpretation. Had he not been vanquished, he would have remained in his more attractive previous home environment in the jesse thickets, which would have been visited frequently by females in oestrus. At that time, however, I did not have the experience to reach*

such a positive conclusion.

Rupert, in the light of a hissing Tilley lamp, washed out the ear wound with antiseptic Dettol and warm water, and with a small cloth he wiped it clean. When the pus was cleared away we could see that the healing process had begun, and that the raw flesh was covered in fresh pink tissue. Rupert packed the cleaned area with purple gentian violet and sulphonamide powders.

We decided that Chakadama's other injuries were superficial, so we simply sprayed them with an antiseptic infusion.

Rupert then flushed out the dart's needle wound with 10 cc's of procaine penicillin - delivered directly into the puncture with a needle and hypodermic syringe. He explained that dart wounds regularly suppurate after capture and that he believed that flushing them with penicillin helped. Finally, we injected 20 cc's of procaine penicillin deep into the animal's buttock muscle to remedy, particularly, the ear wound infection.

The final act was to inject the antidote - Lethidrone - into the straw-thick vein on the rear surface of the rhino's left ear. This, Rupert said, would counteract the morphine in less than one minute. For this procedure everybody was told to be very quiet. I was asked to climb the pole wall and leave the pen. Langton and Josepha, on the other hand, were called into the pen to join Rupert. There the three of them waited for the rhino to stop struggling; and until he was lying quietly on the ground.

Rupert filled a 10 cc syringe with the antidote and inserted the needle into the vein. The two trackers gently began unfastening the rhino's legs. First the rope that tied the front and back legs together was removed. Then, slowly and simultaneously, they untied and removed the ropes that secured the two front legs, and the two back legs together. The trackers gathered up the three scout ropes and handed them to Kadikidiki who was sitting silently on top of the pole fence. Then, as quiet as mice, the two trackers scaled the wall and sat on the top looking down at Rupert below them.

The game warden injected the antidote, slipped the needle from the vein, and stood up alongside the sleeping rhino. He handed the syringe and needle to Langton, and he climbed to the top of the wall himself.

“O.K., you guys,” Rupert spoke softly to the men on top of the wall. “Get down off the mopani poles and move away from the pen.”



A newly captured rhino has its leg fastenings removed – AFTER the gate poles have been secured in place.

“Nobody can go yet,” he informed Langton, indicating the phalanx of men waiting all around the pen in the penumbral shadows cast by the Tilley lamps. Some were, closer, peering through the gaps between the poles. “Not until the rhino is up and on its feet and we can see that everything is all right. You can tell them all to move away from the pen and to sit down quietly on the ground at least ten yards back. They will have to wait a few more minutes for Chakadama to come round. They will all have an opportunity to properly see him on his feet in the morning.”

Everyone complied. Rupert remained atop the wall looking down onto the rhino. There was enough light from one of the outside Tilley lamps, shining its brightness through gaps in the poles, to see what was going on inside the pen.

The rhino lay quietly on its side. I climbed onto the pen wall and sat alongside Rupert.

And we waited.

“Its breathing is improving already,” Rupert informed me in an undertone, not taking his eyes off his still sleeping patient. *“So the antidote is beginning to work.”*

“How long does it take?”

“Intravenously... one or two minutes. Intramuscularly... ten... twenty minutes. I gave him an intravenous injection so he should start to come round any time now.”

Even as Rupert stopped speaking, the rhino lurched from his side onto his brisket and I could hear, by the way he was breathing, that he was awake: and, I looked down at him still in awe. He was huge! It seemed obvious that he was trying to identify the myriad strange scents, sounds and sights that surrounded him. The next instant, Chakadama scrambled to his feet, spinning round frantically in his small enclosure, examining each of the four walls in turn.

At that moment, I immediately understood Rupert’s criticism of the pen size. It was hopelessly inadequate for our very large bull rhino.

The pen was filled with Chakadama’s loud breathing: *uff-fuh... uff-fuh... uff-fuh*, as his probing of the strange scents continued. He pushed against the pen wall. I could feel movement in the poles that I was sitting on. He then stood very still for some time, leaning his nose and weight up against the pole wall. He was yet only half awake. His nostrils were distorted by the pressure of the poles on his snout and his breathing adopted a weird whistling tone.

“Come,” Rupert said to me quietly. *“He is on his feet and breathing O.K.”*

He's now clear of the morphine but is still under the influence of the Largactil. That's the tranquilliser I gave him in the dart cocktail. It will keep him calm for the next several hours. Tranquillisers take some time to wear off."

The two of us climbed down quietly from the pen wall and walked towards the men who were still sitting silently awaiting further instructions.

Rupert addressed his senior tracker. "*Langton,*" he said, "*Tell the men 'thank you' for their work today. Tell them the rhino is up on his feet, but he is still sleepy from the drugs. They can all come and have a look at him in the morning. In the meantime, they can go back to their compound and have some supper. But no noise! I don't want to hear a squeak from their camp tonight!*"

* * *

I looked at my watch. It was nearly midnight. When Rupert and I went into the cottage we found Babs fast asleep on the single bed on the verandah. She had arranged a blanket over her body and her head was resting on a pillow without a pillowcase. The table was set for supper but there was no sign of food.

"*How's the rhino?*" she asked me sleepily, as she woke up to our whispering.

"*He's fine,*" I answered briefly. "*He's on his feet but still groggy from the tranquillisers. He's a very big bull.*"



After receiving the antidote in the pens, rhinos rise to their feet but soon lean up against pen walls, leaning on their noses, waiting for the effect of the drugs to fully wear off.

“I saw you offloading him,” she said sitting up. *“He looked huge.”* It was only then that I realised I hadn’t spoken to my wife properly since the lorry had arrived back in camp. That had been remiss of me. I had been completely absorbed with the offloading procedures and getting the animal safely inside the pen.

“He is huge,” I replied.

“I’ve got some supper ready for you in the kitchen,” she said, getting up.
“Just some soup and home-made bread rolls. I’ll have them warmed up for you in a jiffy.”

After supper Rupert and I went out to examine the rhino and we found him just as we had left him. He had moved, but his nose was still pressed up against the poles and he was obviously still under the influence of the tranquilliser.

We retired to bed shortly after one o’clock.

At 2 a.m. all hell broke loose.

Rupert and I burst from our beds and raced outside. One look at what was going on caused Rupert to shout at the top of his voice for Langton, who by then was fast asleep in the tented compound. I ran back into the cottage and lit a Tilley lamp. By the time I returned to the scene, all the men had assembled in a group close to the pen. Their faces were blank. Their eyes were wide open and staring. They looked at each other apprehensively, not knowing what they were supposed to do.

The rhino had re-acquired most of his normal faculties and he was highly resentful of being confined to such a small mopani pole enclosure. With his front horn, he dug out his water trough; a lengthways-split oil drum that we had carefully prepared with mopani pole supports surrounding it, and sunk into the ground. For several minutes, the rhino beat the metal half-drum about inside the pen before hoisting it into the air and sending it crashing to the ground outside.

Then he started bashing his head and horns against the pen walls, the tops of which began to lean outwards. The one-time erect enclosure started to open

up, and flatten out, like the petals of a daisy. Of particular concern were the gaps that the rhino's wedge-like front horn had made in the tightly packed poles of the entrance gate.

The pen was shaking. Some of the poles were pulsating - erupting back and forth - as the rhino repeatedly attacked the walls. Rupert was sitting on top of the pen wall. He was looking down at the rhino, talking to it quietly. He took the Tilley lamp from my hand and I climbed onto the pen wall at his side.

What I saw shocked me. The rhino had been racing round and round inside his pen, attacking the pole walls hard and randomly wherever he thought he might be able to break through. And all the while his buttocks had been rubbing up against the rough mopani poles behind him. There was a swath of heavy abrasions right across his rump, rubbed raw by the rough bark on the poles. His entire buttock region was weeping blood and serum.

Chakadama was in a state of high excitement. He was blowing loudly through his nostrils; squealing intermittently like a pig; and all the time attacking the poles with his heavy front horn. And I knew that worse was yet to come.

Rupert jumped down from his high perch and, taking the Tilley lamp into the cottage with him, he prepared another dart with a half dose of morphine, a full dose of Largactil, and a full dose of another drug called hyoscine hydrobromide. He loaded the dart into his Cap-Chur gun and returned to the pen. From the top of the wall he fired the dart into the top plane of the rhino's pelvis, near the tail.

Ben had also gone into the cottage. He had charged up another four Tilley lamps, knowing instinctively that we would need more light to rectify the damage that the rhino had wreaked upon the pen. The pen that I had thought was *oh-so-strong* had been severely damaged - weakened - and it was in tatters.

The rhino continued to attack the wall. Chakadama seemed determined to get

out of the trap. He hurried all around the pen, poking his long front horn through the wider gaps between the poles, enlarging them, and pushing the wall still further outwards. At one stage, he tried to climb the now outward sloping pen wall, his front feet reaching two thirds of the way up the pole structure. His weight was enormous and the poles sagged ever more ominously outwards. I had visions of the pole-bases being levered right out of the ground.

The worst damage was amongst the packed poles of the gate. Several had been dislodged and lifted from the bottom slot. Their lower ends stood free from the tightly packed mass at ground level. This caused significant gaps to appear between the poles, and those were the gaps that most greatly attracted the rhino's attention.

Langton climbed onto the wall with a felling axe in his hand. He was intent on using its back head as a hammer to repair the breaks in the gate's pack of poles. But the pen was rocking so much Rupert called him down. All we needed at that moment was for Langton to be shaken off the wall, and for him to fall into the pen.

"There is nothing we can do now until the drugs take effect," Rupert opined wisely. *"The best thing is to just keep still and silent outside until the rhino quietens down."*

"How long will that take?"

"Fifteen... twenty minutes," Rupert replied quietly. He had a worried look on his face. *"If we try to fix the pen now we will only excite Chakadama more. Best we leave him be and let him get on with what he feels like doing and, when he settles down, we can then fix the damage that he has done... to himself and to the pen."*

At that point Rupert *humphed* quietly! And he smiled - a rare occurrence. *"You're being given a baptism of fire,"* he stated with some mischief. *"Catching rhinos isn't always like this."*

* * *

Fifteen minutes later the rhino stopped his wild cavorting. For a while he stood still with his head hanging, but his left ear still canvassed all around as he listened to the strange sounds he could hear outside the pen. Another ten minutes passed. Finally, the rhino subsided quietly onto his brisket and lay still, his unharmed ear now totally inactive.

Rupert walked around the outside of the pen and examined the damage to its walls.

He instructed Langton, with two men to help him, to start repairing the gate. This Langton did by first loosening the freed poles with a crowbar, then hammering them back into position in the ground slot. Yet more poles were hammered down hard into to the re-arranged pack with the flat backend of the felling axe.

Josepha was tasked with taking half-a-dozen men into the adjoining pen, to begin chopping down, at ground level, half of the poles on one side of the inner wall. Once the greater part of the inner wall had been removed the rhino would have access to both the pens! Fortunately, the gate poles in the second pen were firmly packed; and that gate was undamaged.

Kadikidiki, and the men that remained, tried to push the outward sloping walls back into an upright position. It was a soul destroying task. The poles simply would not budge.

Shereni, with great ingenuity, drove the lorry up to one of the pen walls and reversed its tailgate onto the poles. He then used the lorry's engine power to push the poles, *en masse*, back into an upright position. The men then packed the gaps that had now become manifest at the base of the wall, with more soil, which they rammed home hard and tight with crowbars. Having invented the solution, Shereni then moved on to the next pen wall to repeat the process.

There were several intact wall poles left over from the pen's construction.

These Kadikidiki used - with several labourers' help - to brace the walls on the outside. He bracketed them between the underside of the outer strap-poles and a hole that his men dug into the ground. These 45 degree slanting poles on the outside - which we thereafter called *buttress poles* - later became an important and obligatory part of pen construction. This not only reinforced the walls, it also provided a convenient sloping ramp up which we could more easily climb to reach the top of the wall.

When the repairs were nearly complete, Rupert took a long look at the sleeping rhino, assessing its state of sedation, then he quietly climbed back into the pen. He ripped out the dart with its barbed needle and injected penicillin directly into the wound. Then he smothered the animal's raw rump with purple gentian violet and sulphonamide powders. Finally, he delivered Lethidrone deep into the muscle of the rhino's rump. And as quietly as he had entered the pen, so did he then leave it.

"He will be on his feet within 10 minutes," Rupert told me before I had asked the question. *"I can't keep it under drugs forever! And as I explained to you before, Ron, drugs take much longer to act when they are delivered intramuscularly."*

Josepha and his men were, at that stage, still cutting the poles of the inner wall. Twelve of them had been chopped three quarters of the way through, all along the base of the wall at ground level. It was heavy work and the men were taking turns to do the chopping. Josepha had sawed through the strap-poles and broken the Spanish windlass fastenings all along the top of the inner wall. The twisted wire and severed strap poles were tossed out of the pen.

When they thought they had cut deep enough into the poles, the men tried to pull on them to break the final connection - but the task was daunting. It would have been easier had the men chopped on both sides of the wall, but they were not prepared to enter the pen which was occupied by the enormous bull rhino, and Rupert would not have allowed it anyway. So they pushed and they pulled at the poles from inside the vacant pen, trying to break them off at base level - but to no avail.

The rhino got to his feet before the men had broken a single pole down. The animal was clearly still heavily sedated but, hearing, seeing and smelling the men, and seeing the nearby lights of two Tilley lamps through the gaps in the poles, the rhino lunged at the weakened inner fence, breaking two poles down flat in his initial attack.

The men dropped their axes and leapt for the top of the pen walls. Josepha, more calm - more controlled - shouted at them to help him. Quietly he handed them the two burning Tilley lamps. He methodically picked up the scattered axes and dropped them, one by one, over the top of the pole walls. Finally, without a sound, he scaled the pen wall himself, and sat on its top, looking back down at the rhino.

The rhino hit the weakened poles again. Another one went flying into the vacant pen. Then his head appeared in the gap, breaking yet more poles down as he forced his body through the opening. And no sooner was he inside the vacant pen, than he turned and clambered his way back into his old one.

Clearly irritated by the number of big logs lying on the ground at his feet, the rhino horned them angrily and tossed them high into the air. They were all of seven feet long and some had 18 inch diameters, and they came flying out of the enclosure in all directions. Some fell back into the pen, thumping onto the rhino's back, making him even more irascible.

Several logs landed perilously close to my brand spanking new short-wheel-base Land Rover. I quickly ran into the cottage, grabbed its keys, and reversed it out of range of the massive missiles.

The caber-tossing lasted for about twenty minutes after which time the rhino ran out of steam. There were still several logs lying on the ground inside the pens but Chakadama seemed to have had enough. He was tired and the Largactil was making its presence felt.

The rhino then lay down on his brisket, blowing angrily at every new sound,

movement or smell. That was the first time he had lain down voluntarily since his initial resuscitation.

“That’s better,” Rupert commented happily. He smiled again. Rupert was doing what he loved to do and his iceberg heart was melting. *“He’ll be all right now.”*

On his way into camp the previous day Rupert had noticed *mtoa*, the Mashona name for Rhodesian rubber tree bushes, growing at the side of the road on the nearby Chunga mountain plateau. He called Langton over and instructed him to have Shereni drive him and four Batonka men to the plateau at first light the following morning. Rupert said *“Bring just enough mtoa for this rhino for tomorrow. It’s not too far to go, so you can cut fresh food for him every day.”* Langton knew exactly what Rupert was talking about and he nodded.

Everybody retired to their beds. I looked at my watch. It was five o’clock in the morning. In less than an hour it would be light. The night had come and gone; and when I crawled into bed again, I prayed that the rhino would not erupt into another frenzy of activity. Enough was enough. I was dead beat!

We had no more trouble from Chakadama that night and although he became restless as dawn broke, everybody kept away from the enclosure and he remained relatively tranquil.

Rupert was eager to get a new water trough into the pen, believing that after his experiences over the previous fifteen hours, Chakadama would be in dire need of water. The drugs, his first frenetic bid to escape the hunters, his combined nocturnal activities in the pen, and his profuse and constant sweating - would have seriously dehydrated him.

With a rhino in the pens, Rupert had suddenly become effusive, suddenly telling me everything that he believed I needed to know about catching rhinos. To learn about this unique craft from a man of Rupert’s calibre was, for me, an opportunity made in heaven and I hung on his every word.

* * *

Early that first morning, however, was not the time to try to install a new water trough; and Rupert had another plan of action. He was waiting for Langton's return with fresh-cut browse and he was banking on the animal becoming totally preoccupied with feeding on the *mtoa* in the first pen. That would provide Josepha and Kadikidiki with the opportunity they needed to sneak into the adjoining pen to re-set a new half-drum water trough into the ground behind the half-wall protection. Getting it set in place would be the problem. Filling it up with water would be easy.

Langton and Shereni were back by nine o'clock with the lorry's decking full of long whippy branches covered in succulent green leaves. I knew the plant well. When you pulled a leaf off the stem its thick white latex juices oozed copiously. Hence its colloquial English name. What I didn't know at that time was that the Rhodesian rubber tree was a favourite black rhino food.

Kadikidiki and Josepha hung the branches over the pen wall, securing their ends with baling wire to the tops of the poles. The sprays of fresh green leaves, and masses of twigs and small branches, were thus suspended at exactly the right height for the rhino to feed on.

No sooner had the food been provided than Chakadama tackled it, snipping off small branchlets, up to the thickness of my thumb, with his molars. With each mouthful, he stood still and crunched the leaves, the bark and the wood, all together, until they were reduced to a single woody mulch; all of which he swallowed.

Once he started to feed, the rhino became all absorbed. Just as Rupert had anticipated, he never even noticed the two trackers behind the half-wall in the adjoining pen, setting a new half-drum into the ground. And Josepha had it filled with water from a hosepipe without the rhino being any the wiser.

After the rhino had set about feeding, he seemed to lose all his erstwhile trepidations. Within half an hour Rupert went up to the pen wall. He leant against the poles on the outside, less than a foot from the chewing rhino's

head, and he cut an orange in half with his hunting knife. With one arm outstretched through a gap in the poles, he pushed one half of the orange through the hanging green leaves, towards the rhino's mouth. Chakadama sniffed at the fruit. Then out came his upper lip like a mini elephant's trunk. The lip curled around and pulled the orange out of Rupert's fingers and, in the same action, pushed it into its mouth. He chewed and sucked on it, like a delinquent schoolboy enjoying every last drop of its sweet juice. The second half was taken equally gently and devoured with similar fervour. I could not believe my eyes!

Both Rupert and I then sat on the top of the pen wall, saturating the seats of our short trousers with the irremovable gummy sap of the mopani. It did not wash out of clothing, so we knew it would be there forever. But it didn't matter to either of us. I, for one, was totally engrossed in the transformation of a once giant and vicious beast into a placid and gentle pet.

The oranges worked wonders on Chakadama. And once he had eaten his fill of the *mtoa*, he quietly sniffed out the water and wandered into the adjoining pen to empty the trough. As Rupert had suspected, the rhino was as dry as a wooden god.

He then ambled back into his original pen, lay down on his brisket and dozed off. There he remained quiet and unmoving throughout the heat of the day. He roused at four o'clock and resumed feeding on the *mtoa*.

Shortly afterwards I took Babs to the side of the pen to see Chakadama, up close, for the first time. I cut an orange in half and the big and once-so-angry bull gently took it from my hand. Then a delighted Babs gave it the other half.

We had no more trouble from Chakadama. He became as tame as a lamb, and he took to meowing plaintively, like a kitten, seemingly demanding our company. Babs was warned by Rupert to restrict her orange-feeding to one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Too many, Rupert warned, would give her newfound friend terrible diarrhoea.

* * *

NB: *Babs and I discussed, at length, the fact that I would be working on the black rhino capture operation, according to J.C.'s original information, for nine months. The figure 'nine months' triggered something in her mind. She suggested that, if I was to be away from home for that period of time, she might as well use it to make us a baby. So she discarded her contraceptive pills and, when she was convinced she was pregnant, she retired to Binga to wait out her time. Our son, Mark - now 51 years old and living in Brisbane, Australia - was conceived, therefore, in our bush camp at Sizemba.*

The following week Babs and I, travelling in our short-wheel-base Land Rover, escorted the big lorry that carried Chakadama, in a huge iron-strapped wooden crate, to Hwange. The bush tracks, at first, were very rough, the going was slow and the 300-mile journey took us all day long. The rhino was offloaded into a large bush-poled paddock at Mandavu Dam, where he rested, drank and fed (on fresh lucerne - alfalfa) for the following 24 hours. Shortly after dusk on the second night, I opened the gates of the corral and set him free.

That night, Babs and I sat in our canvas camp chairs for over an hour in the starlight, listening to Chakadama crunching away on fresh acacia branches as he slowly moved out of earshot. It was a wonderful experience to know that we had contributed so much to the big rhino's capture and release into the safe haven of Hwange National Park. He was the first of 36 black rhinos that we relocated to Mandavu Dam over the next two years (1964 and 1965).