



Author Richard Harland in 1967 with ivory taken in Gonarezhou, where he posted with the game department.

Stories from Gonarezhou *from African Epic, the Story* *of Paul 'Kambada' Grobler*

by Richard Harland

There was a tract of low-lying, wild, malaria-ridden bush country where southern Africa's finest tuskers roamed. They drifted amongst the far-flung kraals of the Shangaan people, fed themselves in the lush riverine jungles of the Sabi, Lundi, Nuanetsi and Limpopo Rivers, and wandered over the thousands of square miles of stark, dry mopane forests. They tended their duties amongst the ubiquitous herds of cow elephants, moving on to secluded valleys in the low hills where secret springs flowed with minute quantities of pure water, and the long grass and the combretum bush and scrub mopane kept the big stomachs full and the great ivories growing. This was the land of hundred-pounder patriarchs.

The great bushveld spread over the south-eastern portion of Rhodesia, eastwards far across Mozambique, and south of the Limpopo into what became the Kruger National Park of South Africa. The wilderness lying between the Limpopo in the south and the Lundi and Sabi Rivers in the north was known in Rhodesia as Gonarezhou (pronounced Gornah-reh-zor), meaning 'the refuge of elephants'. Chief Sengwe's people and the million acres of Nuanetsi ranch lay to the west, and eventually, in 1975, the government proclaimed the Gonarezhou to be a National Park, three thousand square miles of unspoilt, big game territory.

The big tuskers had their special hideaways, and Paul stumbled onto one of these when the D.C. called him to take action on crop raiding bulls. They had killed a tribesman in headman Chikwarakwara's area, near the confluence of the Bubi and Limpopo Rivers. Chief Sengwe was besieged by complaints from elsewhere in the south of his domain. His people just could not afford to have their patches of millet, watermelons, pumpkins and sweet potatoes torn up by marauders.

Paul took time off from working on the game cropping at Mazunga section of Liebig's Ranch, loaded camp gear, food, his two trackers Bennet and Frackson, plus the other two essentials, Marie and .458 rifle, and arrived in the affected area by mid-morning. This was one of the few areas in the country that Paul had never hunted during his previous twenty-five years of elephant control. The Gonarezhou, Sengwe and south of the Nuanetsi River were all unknown territories for him. That strange tree, the msimbiti (Lebombo ironwood) which grows in dense thickets, often on stony ground, with its extremely hard, brittle timber and close-packed

curly leaves, dark green on one side, furry-grey on the other, was another novelty.

Elephants love msimbiti trees. They push their way amongst the rigid trunks, feeding on the leaves and twigs, sheltering from the sun in the dark groves, feeling secure that humans are unlikely to enter their strongholds undetected. And woe is he who takes on elephants in the msimbitis without a big bore rifle and a lot of experience and self-confidence.

Paul soon learned that even a half-inch thick twig was hard enough to deflect a bullet. For a hunter, this was the main difference between Zambezi jesse and Lowveld msimbiti thickets. Jesse-type cover, no matter how dense, seldom threw a heavy bullet off course at short range, whereas an ironwood stem, say ten feet off the ground and only as thick as one's wrist, could seriously divert a bullet unless struck absolutely

in the centre. Having shot hundreds of elephants in the msimbiti country of Gonarezhou during tsetse fly control in the late 1960s, I knew exactly what surprises Paul experienced when he missed those bulls in the ironwoods.

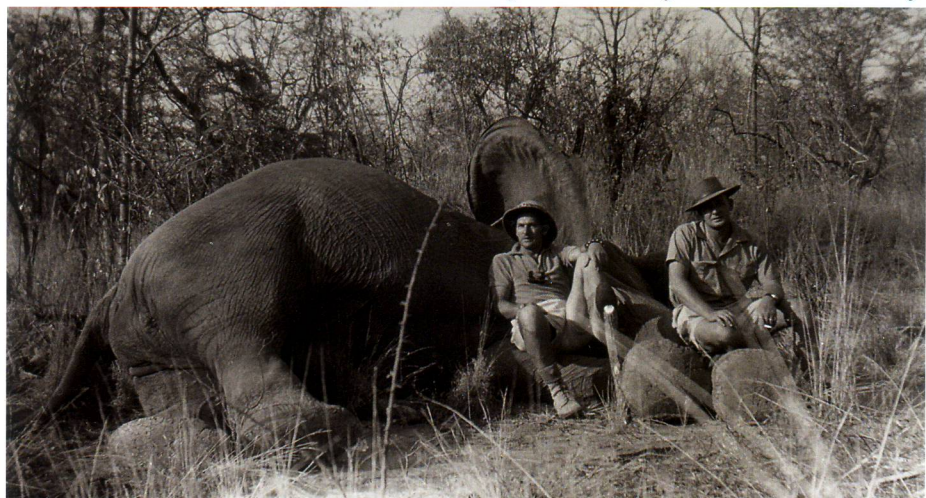
Then there were those beautiful big ivories. Paul avoided killing the biggest tuskers in any group of marauders. No sense in that. No point in government having anything of value out of this exercise! The fifteen bulls he shot were all youngsters.

"You know, Richard, I saw so many bulls with big ivory over the twelve days I worked that district. I estimated to have seen around sixty carrying eighty pounds or more per side. Even allowing that I may have seen some of them more than once, it was incredible."

I nodded. I had hunted and shot some of those old fellows several years prior to Paul's



On safari, Batonka style, in the Zambezi Valley.



Paul (left) and his nephew with a marauding, crop-raiding elephant he was brought in to kill.



Starting in 1966, Grobler handled elephant culling in Wankie Park, including the large-scale processing of hundreds of hides and thousands of tons of meat.



Paul and his friend, Tok, after a successful hunt in the thick Zambezi jesse vegetation.

hunts. To this day, occasional big tuskers are taken by hunters in the south-eastern lowveld of Zimbabwe, and some publicity has been given to king-sized individuals roaming the Kruger National Park.

In 1967 I was guiding a hunter, Victor Verster, when he downed the Rhodesian record bull carrying 132 pounds and 107 pounds of ivory, in the Lundi River area of Gonarezhou. 'The rocky refuge of elephants' is one of Africa's finest tracts of unspoilt big game habitat and it is nothing less than an act of wanton criminality to allow human invasion to destroy the game

reserve and its wildlife, as is happening today.

Despite the shooting of hundreds of elephants in tsetse fly corridors during the 1960s, by 1971 the population of Gonarezhou jumbos had reached excessive numbers, causing a measurable loss in the vegetation which was an unsustainable situation for the long term. Culling took place immediately following the Wankie cull of about 1400 animals.

The move from Wankie to the Lowveld took on the logistical aspects of a military operation. Leaving the shell of the Shapi base factory behind, Paul hired two trains to move

all his equipment, vehicles and workforce from a siding near Wankie to Twiza siding on the rail line running through Gonarezhou to Maputo in Mozambique. The biltong drying racks alone occupied three wagons; tractors and trailers took up several more.

Paul also took along a 'traxcavator', a large machine used for digging trenches. Sporadic outbreaks of the deadly disease anthrax had occurred in the south-east of Zimbabwe, and both national parks and the veterinary department suspected the big distances between anthrax cases were the result of vultures transporting the disease around the district. Paul was requested to clean up absolutely everything at the scene of each shooting, leaving nothing which might attract the big birds. After skinning, stripping off the meat and chopping out the tusks, the remains were buried in deep trenches dug by Paul's machine.

It turned out to be a long, tough season. Coming after a Wankie Park cull, the operation in the north of Gonarezhou went on into the very hottest month, October, when hellish temperatures raged through night and day, the searing sun burning the land to whites, greys and browns. There was no escape for man or beast from the legendary lowveld brain-numbing furnace heat. Even the Lundi River's hippos suffered, with pools shrinking to puddles and no grazing for miles around to sustain the great beasts. Paul and the rangers culled half the population.

Lions soon learned to feed themselves on the tons of meat drying on the racks, sometimes indulging in rowdy banquets involving up to twenty cats. Somewhat similar to present-day politicians – the difference being lions generally have dignity and courage, plus they have no option but to eat when they can.

Paul employed two young European fellows to assist him, and despite their boss's advice to sleep in the back of one of the trucks, the lads were quite happy to simply throw their sleeping bags on the ground under a tree on the edge of the camp. Quite understandably, the two found that beer was one of the best antidotes to the dehydration they suffered in the intense heat. The problem was the alcohol stayed in the blood stream while the water content was sweated out. A pee was a rare luxury in the over-dry atmosphere!

It came to pass that one night a pride of half a dozen lions, some frolicsome sub-adults amongst them, had fed well on the biltong and, while the older ones lay about, a couple of the

adolescents strolled around the camp under the tall, dark-foliaged ebonies and wide-canopied wild mango trees. They came across a pair of human bodies, gurgling and snoring softly and smelling strongly of fermented grain and hops.

Curious, the lions sniffed at the faces, wrinkled their noses in distaste, then decided these comatose creatures really should be removed from the environs of the normally rubbish-free camp site. One grabbed the edge of a sleeping bag, straddled it and walked off, leaving the body on it to roll off and continue snoring in the dust. The other cat took a firmer hold on the second bag-plus-occupant and mooched off into the bushes with it.

"Bwana! Bwana!" Karinibwino's urgent voice sounded outside Paul and Marie's tent at five o'clock, as the dawn sky lightened over the Chitove Pools stagnating warmly in the Lundi's sandy bed.

"What is it?" Paul appeared at the tent entrance, half dressed and with a rifle in his hand.

"The young bwanas. One is not there under the tree, the other one is just lying on the ground and doesn't want to wake up."

"Yah, Bono. They were drunk last night. Don't worry about them. Now where is my tea?"

"But Bwana, I see a drag mark going into the bushes and some lion spoor. It is too dark to see properly. Come with your torch."

Paul first shook the one lad into wakefulness. He was undamaged but befuddled and unable to explain the disappearance of his sleeping bag.

He had no idea where his friend was either. Lion spoor was everywhere. Paul and Karinibwino followed the now-visible drag marks for a good thirty yards from the edge of the camp site before finding the man, still half in his sleeping bag, snoring and reeking of old beer.

"Why am I here?" he asked in slurred tones, blinking red-rimmed eyes at Paul standing over him.

"Once you've found out for yourself, I think you'll listen to my advice to sleep in the truck," Paul replied, laughing heartily.

The other sleeping bag was located some way off, shredded in such a way that can only be done by a couple of playful lions.

A later, tragic incident happened in the south of Gonarezhou while a cull was on the go around the Nuanetsi section of the reserve. Paul found a herd of fifteen elephants early one morning, went in with the team and his

vehicles, put the animals down and got on with the butchering job while the rangers, under the leadership of Clem Coetsee, went off to find another group.

Some time later the mobile radio in Paul's Land Rover broke through the sounds of the men working on the great carcasses. "Paul! Clem here. We have a serious casualty. Please return to base and be ready to fly him out. We will be at Mabala-uta a.s.a.p. Maybe an hour. Over."

"Roger, Clem. I'll be there in half an hour. Out."

"We had found a herd and I gave instructions to my four rangers as to our formation," Clem told me. "There was an honorary officer along with us and I told him to stick with my man on the one flank. We had to prevent breakaways, otherwise some may have escaped. Even if one caught up with them, shooting them all over the countryside made recovery difficult.

"Well, things got very heated. You know how aggressive these Gonarezhou elephants can be. In the action all over the place, a group broke out and some of the rangers and the honorary officer, his name was Ryan, rushed off to stop them. Ryan suddenly collapsed. We were using .375s which of course often go right through an elephant, especially a young one. Well, a ricochet, probably coming out of a shot elephant, had hit him in the stomach.

"I radioed Paul who had his plane at

Mabala-uta airstrip, then tried to get Ryan as comfortable as possible for the flight out. He was quite coherent, and in fact told me that he did not want any blame attached to anyone for this accident. 'No witch hunts, Clem. It was nobody's fault', were his words."

Paul flew him to the hospital at Triangle, but Colin Saunders, the doctor, was unable to save his life. The damage done by the bullet was too severe, added to which was the unavoidable delay in reaching hospital. This was the only fatal incident during all the culling operations involving Paul in the various National Parks, but Clem relates another episode which happened years later during a Wankie elephant cull.

Similar to the Gonarezhou incident, the herd under fire broke up and was pursued. In the fast-moving mêlée, an African assistant, not involved with the shooting, found himself where he should not have been and was felled by a stray bullet. He was rushed to Wankie hospital, and the game rangers told the story during the subsequent police enquiry, naturally confirming that no one was to blame for the accident. However, a couple of months later the fully-recovered man returned to work, proudly bearing a .404 bullet! The only member of the culling team using that calibre was ... let's call him Tony. That story had a sad ending. The man was run down and killed by a car a month after leaving hospital. ☹



The Groblers on a camping vacation at Victoria Falls in Southern Rhodesia.