

The Mutha Elephant

By Sten Cedergren
From The Adventurous Life
of a Vagabond Hunter
Published by Safari Press
www.safaripress.com

David Ommanney, in his Foreword to this book, wrote that he and his PH hunting friends all said the same thing about Cedergren: that he had ice water in his veins....



Cedergren with his headboy, Nzvi, and a 114-lb bull tusk. Tana area, 1968.

While checking my mail one morning, I came across a letter addressed to me in a rather shaky hand. It must be from one of my safari boys having problems, I supposed while opening it. Inside was a short message written in Swahili: *Ndofu mkubwa sana. Mkono tano.* (Very big elephant. Five lengths.) It was signed, Muia.

The Africans used to measure ivory length from the lip by placing the lower part of their arm – from elbow to fingertip, a distance of about eighteen inches – along the tusk. This elephant supposedly had five

lengths, so more than seven feet of ivory must have been showing!

Muia was one of my local trackers. He lived at a place called Mutha, about fifteen miles north of the Tsavo National Park boundary, between the Yatta Plateau and the Tana River. The area was known to produce big elephant, and during the rainy season the elephant used to leave the park's sanctuary and roam far out into hunting block Number 33.

However, most of the area was covered in black cotton soil, which made it almost impossible for even a four-wheel-

drive vehicle to negotiate it at this time of the year.

I checked the date stamp on the envelope – eight days ago. The elephant could be anywhere by now, even back in the park, as they travelled great distances at this time of year and the natives always exaggerate. I dismissed it and threw the note into the wastebasket. But then I took it out and read it again. If the elephant truly carried five lengths of ivory – *mkono tano*, as Muia said – it must be one hell of a big animal – perhaps over a hundred pounds a side.



The young Cedegren never forgot J.A. Hunter's advice on hunting elephant: Get as close as you can – and then get 10 yards closer!

I was about to throw the note back into the wastebasket when my mind conjured up the house I'd seen advertised at Watamu on the coast overlooking the Indian Ocean, which was up for sale for £5000. I had time to spare and one elephant licence left! If I could shoot a 100-pound-per-side elephant, I'd have the down payment. A couple of hours later, with all my equipment in the back of the Land Rover, I was motoring toward Makueni, where my gunbearers and cook lived. The Galana River was in flood when I crossed it, and the water running into the cab, but I managed to get across.

The rain was pelting down when I picked up my men, but inside the hunting car everybody was in high spirits at the prospect of once again being out in the bush – and the excitement of looking for a big tusker.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the small village of Mutha, and I sent my two gunbearers, Munyoki and Mamu, to look for Muia while Malelu, my cook, went to

buy a few supplies at the nearest shop. Time went by, and I brewed myself a pot of tea and was busy drinking it when my two men arrived back in the company of a smiling Muia. All obviously had had a taste or two of palm wine, as they looked exceedingly merry.

"Yes," Muia exclaimed, "I have seen the big elephant once more since I sent you the letter, at the most six miles from here, and the tusks almost touched the ground." We all looked at each other briefly before scrambling into my vehicle. We were off.

The going was rough *mbaya sana*. We had to leave the main road and take a hunting track, which according to the locals was *mbaya sana* (very bad). Even in a four-wheel-drive Land Rover, the progress was slow and we got stuck repeatedly. Each time, everybody would pile out to look for branches to put under the wheels while Muia went ahead to check the track.

I was in the process of yet again jacking up one wheel when I saw Muia running

back along the track, clearly excited. "There are fresh, big elephant tracks just around the corner," he exclaimed breathlessly.

We all dropped whatever we were doing and followed him at a run. There, in the middle of the road, was a pile of fresh elephant dung with huge tracks leading off into the bush. The dung was not formed but loose, indicating that the intestines of the elephant were not working properly and, therefore, he was old. Muia stuck his toes into the dung heap and nodded excitedly, saying it was warm. I measured the tracks. The front foot was almost twenty-four inches in diameter, and the tracks were almost completely smooth. It was indeed a very old elephant.

Muia was almost beyond himself with excitement. "That's him, the big one – *mkono tano!*"

We ran back to the hunting car to get my rifle and ammunition and to remove most of our wet clothing. I wondered if the elephant might have heard the car and

Hunters of yesteryear: 1959



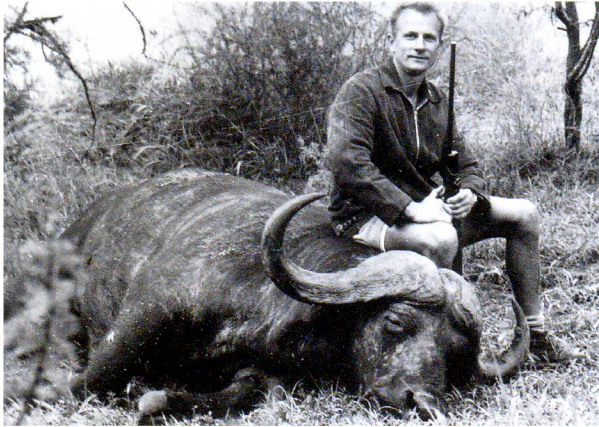
*Cedergren's personal best trophy: The 'Mutha' elephant,
120 and 119 lbs. Yatta Plateau, Kenya, 1959.*

started moving. If not, he wouldn't be more than ten to fifteen minutes ahead of us. We hurried back and took the spoor. I tested the wind with my ash bag and was disturbed to see it was blowing directly down the bull's tracks. He would scent us and know we were following – and he was heading toward the national park – and safety – ten miles away! Each step the elephant took spanned more than six feet. He was in a hurry. He had obviously heard the car and was moving fast. His huge feet sank almost two feet into the soft black soil.

Now we had only one chance – to run along the spoor – and we ran. We were all young and fit, but running through this mud and wait-a-bit thornbushes was not the easiest mode of travel. After a mile of slithering around in the mud and tearing through thornbushes, my clothing was in tatters and my lungs were almost bursting, but on we ran.

“*Ndofu na choka!*” (elephant getting tired) hissed Muia, pointing at the tracks, which now did not seem so far apart. Also, here and there we could see where the tusks had cut through the mud like plow discs – the elephant was slowing down. Munyoki offered to carry my rifle, but I refused. *Never let go of your gun, my mind kept saying as I ran – you never know when you will need it, particularly here where the visibility is only ten to fifteen yards.* I must admit that the weight of my .500 Westley Richards was an added impediment, but on we ran.

Once in a while I glimpsed the black bodies of the three men ahead of me, running effortlessly through the thornbushes. Apparently their oily skin prevented the thorns from gripping, but my own body was bleeding all over. I didn't give a damn. Darkness was only half-an-hour away. Everything around me was grey – the



Cedergren's first buffalo, taken on his first safari in Uganda, 1955.

bushes, the air – and the rain had increased. I made a final effort to catch up with my men and, coming around a bush, I ran smack into Muia, who stood pointing with a heaving breast. Not twenty yards away I saw the upper part of the elephant's head, facing us. The huge animal stood as motionless as a statue. Then, with a scream, he charged. He was tired and had no intention of running again.

He was less than ten paces away when the bushes parted and for the first time I

saw the massive tusks jutting out like telephone poles. My rifle leaped up, seemingly of its own volition, and I fired the right barrel. Too high! The elephant staggered and almost went to his knees, but quickly recovered. I gave him the second barrel, and he crashed to the ground.

I quickly reloaded. The only sounds to be heard were the hissing rain and my own heartbeats. The elephant's front legs stretched out for a moment, and then everything was still. The king was dead. And then pandemonium reigned. Munyoki and Mamu and Muia emerged from nowhere, pumping my hand, and then they were all over the elephant.

I walked slowly up to him and inspected the tusks. They were magnificent! About 23 inches around at the lip and almost seven feet sticking out. If the nerves were not too large, the tusks would easily go over one hundred pounds a side. Soon it was dark and the rain stopped. My men lit a fire, cut

some meat from the elephant's cheeks, and started to roast it. They offered me some when it was cooked, and I ate it with relish. As I stood there close to the fire, with its light dancing over my companions' bodies and the bright African stars over their heads, I knew in my heart that this was where I belonged and that I would always remember this hunt.

We walked slowly back to the car. Malelu had managed to pitch two small tents and get a fire going. I brewed a pot of tea, laced it with whisky, and then went to bed. Just before dozing off, I idly wondered whether I would have had the same courage as the old bull elephant: to bravely face my adversaries and charge when I was too tired to run anymore.

In the morning we all walked back to the dead elephant, armed with axes to cut out the tusks. He lay like a small grey mountain. Two hyena took off in fright when they saw us. The tusks weighed 121 and 119 pounds apiece and measured 9 feet 6 inches and 9 feet 4 inches. Muia got a generous bonus, plus a pair of binoculars, and I went back to Nairobi to sell my tusks and buy my house on the coast. ♡