



ASG interviews Johan Calitz

NEAR DEATH

A group of people speaking three different languages with no one understanding the other, together hunting one of Africa's most dangerous animals – that's a sure recipe for disaster!

In a local Italian restaurant, an African hunter known and respected across the globe, was sharing with me his account of one fateful day, the 30 September 2001. This is the story of Johan Calitz, a big-game hunter of 27 years standing, who allowed circumstances to compromise his usual values.

"A regular client of mine had asked me to join him on a hunt in Tanzania. I have to respect confidentiality, so all I can divulge is that he is a Prime Minister. As he was hunting with another company, he asked me along merely 'for the ride' so to speak. As it happened, the entire hunt had been very difficult even before this particular day, for many reasons, the main problem being the communications gap. My client and I spoke English and no French, the PH spoke French and no English, so there was an interpreter who spoke both, and there were four trackers who only spoke Swahili which none of us could understand."

Johan did not want to be drawn into comment on this issue as the hunt had been arranged by a leading operator, and the PM, his client, had simply asked Johan to accompany him, not lead the hunt. He continued with the story:

"It was about 2:30 in the afternoon and we were driving down a dry riverbed, in the Selous, Tanzania's greatest wilderness. Ahead of us were two big buffs. The PH (who was French-speaking, don't forget), the client and trackers got out the vehicle and started heading up the river. For me to follow the PH, his interpreter, client plus an entourage of trackers all up a wide-open riverbed seemed pretty pointless, as it appeared to be a straight-forward hunt, but I trailed along.

The PH was indicating to the client which animal to go for. I shouted, (whether he could hear me or not), 'The buffalo's looking left, shoot him on the shoulder,' but at that stage it seemed they could not understand each other very well. There were lots of hand signals. Then a shot rang out.

I saw the buffalo pick up its tail and run off. Normally when a buffalo runs picking up its tail,

it shows he has taken some pain and that can only mean one thing. They all went with a tracker to where the buff had been, but returned saying they thought they had missed him. I disagreed and went down with my rifle to check for myself. The buffalo had run away in a kind of circle from the spot, and after about 30 metres I found a leaf with a piece of stomach contents on it, mixed with blood.

"I said to myself, this is very dangerous. The PH had had problems with his rifle a couple of days ago as he had faulty ammunition, so he had asked the client if he could use his 470. (It was on a previous buffalo charge on the same hunt, that the PH's 475 ammo was faulty and I ended up having to shoot the charging buffalo)."

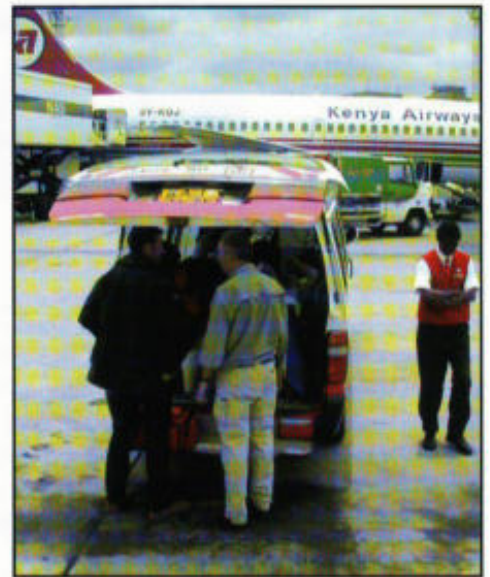
Some details appeared to be emerging of prior problems on the hunt. Johan took a sip of wine.

"The PH took the client's rifle, gave the rifle belt to one of the trackers, and the client stayed in the car. I had my 500 Nitro. The four trackers with us immediately set off after the tracks, while I hung back thinking, that this is not ideal, I do not have complete control over the situation,' with the trackers speaking Swahili, the PH leading the track speaking French and not speaking Swahili, and myself not speaking either languages."

It seems obvious, while sitting in the cool comfort of the restaurant and drinking merlot, that to try and sign-language your way through a situation like that has to be a bit of a challenge.

"Anyway, I followed them although I stopped, turned around, and started back, thinking, 'this is a mess.'

They followed the tracks into the thicker whereupon the PH called me. I saw the buffalo take off - all I could see was a black object charging into the bush. The only thing I could do was try to get around into him as he rapidly disappeared into the thicker. With one tracker I went to the spot where the buffalo had been to look for any signs. At this point the PH and the other trackers ran after the buffalo blindly following its sound. I heard a shot go off and as I ran up towards the PH I heard the buffalo bellow that familiar sound of a charge. As I reached the PH the buffalo was there. We both shot as I was now right beside the PH. But the buffalo must have seen my movement as I ran, and diverted his charge. The animal was from here to that door away," (*Johan showed a distance of less than 4 metres*) "and the two shots had no effect. As he turned for me, I dived, but he hit me with his horns, shattering my leg. On the ground I looked up at the buffalo, and made momentary eye



CASAVAC from the ambulance.

contact, putting my arm up for protection as he went for me. That's when he nearly ripped my forearm off. He tossed me around like a rag doll, putting holes in my upper leg, stomach and rib cage. Every time I made eye contact he flung me around further.

At that specific moment I knew I was going to die. And what flew through my mind was, "Tanzania of all places...what a shitty place to die."

***I started praying to the Lord,
begging to see my family
again.***

Meanwhile the beast was working me really hard, growling and grinding. Then he turned away, not making any more eye contact, and started shoving me around with his bosses. He was angry. He wanted to finish me off now. All he had done that afternoon was rest in the riverbed and suddenly he had had lead pumped into him."

"Where was the PH?"

"He was out of ammo and the belt was with a tracker so the few minutes it took for him to reload seemed an eternity, but let's put things into perspective...he saved my life. He could have backed off, he could have shot the buffalo while I was being flung around and hit me instead. Suddenly more shots were fired, and with what turned out to be the last shot I glanced up and looked into this beast's eyes as he was staggering towards me. I rolled to avoid him, but he stepped over me, and dropped right on top of me. All 1800+ pounds (850kg). It really hurt like hell, and I yelled for help. The PH came up to me and held my head while speaking French, which was Greek to me! The translator never seemed to be where the action was.

"I signalled to the PH to go to the car and radio for help. My leg was shattered. The trackers cut two branches and tore their T-shirts up and did



The injured hunter on a stretcher about to be loaded aboard a plane for emergency transport.

what they could to make a splint. This was very, very sore. While lying there, I realised that if there were any arteries severed I would be gone, so I started praying again as I looked at each wound. Assessing the damage, I knew the ankle was bad but I wouldn't bleed to death from that. The arm... well I could see the bone, the veins and arteries and it did not look good. I could see my rib cage, and my stomach was gaping open.

Then I had the most incredible experience: I saw a beautiful white light above me and I thought right then that perhaps I was not going to die. I looked down at the wounds: there were holes everywhere, sure, but nothing was bleeding any more. (In spite of the 12½ hours before I got to the hospital operating table I did not lose a fatal amount of blood.) A track was hastily cut for the vehicle to pick me up, and we made our way back to the camp. I didn't want to pass out even though the pain was incredible. There was one specific tracker who kept my mouth moist by drenching a small cloth from his water bottle and letting me suck on it. I won't forget that. My client was in total shock. There was a doctor waiting at the camp (thanks to my client who travels with his doctor) and he gave me morphine and a drip and they drove me to the airstrip where I flew to Dar es Salaam.

***And one thing
I told my client:
when some taxidermist has
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I want it!"***

From Dar we flew to Nairobi where they operated on me in the early hours of the next morning. The doctor and the client's bodyguard watched over me constantly. In Nairobi, my cell rang, and my good friend and doctor from Kroonstad, Nikki Nel was on the line. I said, 'Whatever you do, get me on a charter to Joburg.' A day and a half later the charter arrived with Nikki and another doctor, and they flew me to Joburg. I needed to be opened up again and cleaned while the wounds remained gaping. A month after the accident they closed the last wound. The doctors said there were some strange bacteria (probably from that buffalo) that took treatment to get rid of.

In March this year a group of hunting friends insisted I have a re-constructive operation on my ankle in Georgia USA. So after I hobbled around SCI for a few days, a team of some of the top surgeons went to work (free of charge) in doing their very best to sort me out. I have some very loyal friends scattered around the globe, and at the end of the day, I have no regrets.



I learnt a lesson from all this. In hindsight, I should have stuck to my motto, which, up to then, I had always done: 'If I am not in control, then I don't get involved.'

But the most important thing I learnt was that there is a living God. This was reality for me. Miracles still exist in the 21st century, or I would not be alive today. And one thing I told my client: "When some taxidermist has finished with the Buffalo, I want it!"

As this was going to print more than a year after the attack, Johan was heading for Jo'burg for his final operation to repair nerves and tendons in his arm in order to try bring back full use and feeling.



*Johan Calitz
All smiles now!*



How the hunt was supposed to end