

The Hunted Game

(Extracted from: The End of an Era - the Death of Zimbabwe's National Parks - by Garyana)

There are two things that really define the African bush. Fire and a good thunder storm. They are two things that I never tire of watching, but preferably from somewhere comfortable. Unfortunately circumstances occasionally dictate otherwise. Hunting dangerous game is the sport of kings. What makes it especially exciting is when you turn from hunter to hunted.

I was pretty occupied in controlling the rabies outbreak in those four months between finishing school and starting university and in each of the next four vacations. Mostly it was poison baits to kill jackals but mongooses and wild (and feral) cats were also on the eradication list. So were buffalo. Somebody (Stuart Hargreaves, the head of the vet department, actually) had decided that buffalo were a major factor in harbouring and spreading Foot and Mouth Disease, and so orders were given for their eradication from all farming land in the district. I was keen for any experience and so readily agreed to assist on the culls. (I had to beg quite hard since I was decidedly "green" when it came to buffalo.)

The culls themselves were dangerous, brutal affairs. Most of the men were local farmers with a thin sprinkling of National Parks and Tsetse department men. One of the Vet department officers was always nominally in charge but control over this mixed mob was generally poor, especially as most of the farmers heartily disagreed with the whole affair. The running of the cull was also usually sloppy. An air force helicopter carrying the O.C. of the operation would drive the buffalo into a waiting line of hunters who would then attempt to shoot them all before the frightened, wildly running animals overran their position. It certainly taught one a lot about frontal shots on buffalo, and how thick a tree was actually buffalo proof. Sitting in the helicopter were a couple of marksmen who's job it was to pick off as many of the buffaloes as possible before they hit our line and then finish off any wounded or escaping animals that made it through the cordon. After the first cull I participated in I seriously envied the helicopter crew! The herd selected had been too big and at least forty animals had run through our position. I put my back to a stout tree and shot two buffaloes as they galloped past. Most of the others had the same idea, which wasn't a great one. We mostly used solids which over penetrated even on bulls let alone the cows of which 90% of the herd was comprised, and there were bullets flying wildly up and down the line. How nobody got hit I don't know, but the only injury was a farmer who had tried to hide behind a 4" diameter mopane tree, as the cull disintegrated into a rout. A big bull had hardly paused in his stride as he plowed the tree down and stomped all over the farmer as he went. Fortunately he was just running away from the chopper and didn't stop to put the horns in or even a good stomping. A broken arm, collar bone, some ribs and a dislocated knee were the "only" injuries.

The second cull went a lot more smoothly, and afterwards I got to meet one of the old tsetse department hunters who had been in the helicopter. He was black and blue from hip to eye on his right side. He had been leaning out of the chopper at an odd angle to shoot a

buff between the shoulder blades with a .458, and the rifle had smacked him properly. He had fired another couple of shots and given up. His cheek was split open and there was a massive haematoma on his shoulder and the blood had obviously run down inside the skin causing the bruising. Even his fingers were swollen. Suddenly being the gunner in the helicopter seemed like a poor plan unless it had a fitted machine gun.

The next cull confirmed my thoughts on being airborne for the operation but also led to a major change in my life. The whole cull was doomed from the start. Two of the farmers driving in to lend us a hand were ambushed and wounded by terrorists. A couple of others had evacuated them and were now leading the search for the gooks. A farmers' daughter was bitten by a rabid kudu and he had to take her to hospital (oddly enough the kudu population was virtually annihilated by the rabies but none of the other ungulates were affected). We therefore took up position five men down to start with. The herd was too big, and as soon as they appeared I knew they would probably over run our position again. The men in the chopper knew this as well and were furiously shooting animals at the back of the herd to whittle the numbers down. It was a regular full scale battle, and over eighty buffalo went down in the killing field. Only about ten had actually escaped. But the chopper had suddenly lifted in mid cull and flown away. There were at least two wounded bulls that had disappeared into the mopane and it should have been the crew in the chopper that finished them. Otherwise it meant a follow up on foot. A wounded buff on its own was bad enough but combined with rabid jackals all over the area, and gooks as well - nobody wanted that job.

We were standing around in a group while two parks game scouts and a tsetse department "magotika" (a native hunter- literally "he who cooks meat") cast around looking at spoor and deciding what was actually hit and needed to be followed. The helicopter pilot radioed in to say that one of his marksmen (a National Parks Honorary officer) was critical, hit with heavy bullet that had come up through the floor. It turned out to be a .458, and the one parks scouts pointed out a couple of buff where bullets had ricocheted off their bosses in the melee. Only a couple of men used .458's and they were pretty down-cast, knowing that it had to be one of them who had fired a poorly aimed shot that had bounced into their friend. The pilot called in again to say that the officer was dead and that he was landing in Bulawayo and wouldn't be back to help us as he was needed on anti terrorist operations as soon as he had refuelled. That news certainly put a damper on an already dark day. The farmers who comprised most of the group started to pack up. There was trouble around and they had families to protect. "A wfully sorry old chap but you are the government types who want these buff shot so you follow up and please ensure that we don't have wounded ones to add to our present troubles". Two bulls were definitely wounded and one cow probably was.

There were only two government officers on the ground. Two others, including the senior local Vet had been in the chopper but they were now sitting in Bulawayo and in no position to get back in time to help us. Command was a problem. There were no vector tsetse officers. John Davis was the senior Parks man but the Veterinary NCO was reluctant to take orders from him. The Tsetse Magotcha was fine and there were three Parks junior staff. I was a Parks cadet, but seconded to the vet department, again, as a cadet with no real standing as to rank. A couple of farmers had sent their labour and lorries to recover the dead buffalo and they needed protection. The Vet department men were not hunters but security, and were armed with Lee Enfield rifles. After much wrangling and radio messages relayed to their boss through the chopper pilot it was agreed that most of them would stay to protect the farm workers whilst four would assist in the follow up. John detailed the Magotcha to follow up the cow and gave him the pick of two Vet men to act as escort. To my surprise he detailed the old sergeant to accompany me and one Vet man, while he took the other two game scouts - one very new- and a Vet man with him. He also allocated me the animal that seemed to be worst hit. Frothy lung blood marked a trail that even I could follow. "With a bit of luck you'll find it dead before too far," said John, "and the Sarge will watch your back for cooks."

I was very surprised at the allocation of the Sarge. He and John were inseparable friends, and he was an uncommonly fine man in a tight spot. Both of them were a sight to behold. In their sixties at least and as hard and wiry as the mopane trees that we stood under. John was ex royal navy and had survived a couple of sinkings by 1945 when he decided he never wanted to see water in large quantities ever again and moved to Africa to go hunting. He spoke little and despised weakness. He led by example and always did the most dirty or dangerous jobs himself. The Sarge was a Betonka. Short, thin, complete with massive holes in his ears, tribal scars on his cheeks and incisors filed to sharp points. He ate any meat, baboon, jackal, civet, whatever and precious little else. The other parks scouts told nervous stories (which he greatly encouraged) about who else he had eaten. He had apparently started out as a police constable before WWII. Decorated for bravery in rescuing a white trooper from a lion and fired for either theft or a little indiscretion with somebody's wife depending on who told the story. Since he filched anything and everything that wasn't positively nailed down, and committed numerous indiscretions with the local population's wives and daughters on a weekly basis, it was probably both. Rupert Fothergill had recruited him in the 1950's to assist in Operation Noah, the rescue of animals from the rapidly filling lake Kariba. He had served with considerable distinction, before being fired for being a little too zealous in his collection of "bush meat" to supply a butchery in the new township of Karoi. He had gone to work for John as a gardener. He was apparently lousy and nicked nearly as much produce as he grew despite regular thashings from John. Professional Ivory hunting was dying out and John joined the then new National Parks department as a wildlife control officer. He got Mlamsi a job as a game scout and managed to keep him out of jail. His earlier jail stints and John's hippo hide sjambok had persuaded Mlamsi to leave the other parks staff's wives alone, and not to steal anything of John's or the Department's that would be missed. Even so it had taken him over twenty years to make sergeant, and he had served under John the whole time. They had hunted man eating lions and rogue elephants together, and, during the closing years of Rhodesia's bush war both had served as territorials in the

Selous Scouts fighting the communist terrorists. It was an honour that John had asked his "shadow" to accompany me.

Two months earlier, during the first vac, I had gone to shoot a rogue elephant while John was too ill to stand with malaria and Mlusi had been sent along to hold my hand. Things had gone pear shaped in a hurry. The bull had charged, my rifle failed, and my entourage of local tribesmen and Parks Scouts had fled at remarkable speed- except for the Sarge who, with the bull only ten paces away had calmly handed me my spare rifle. It felt remarkably good to have such a man along as both tracker and tutor.

I was set to go "as is". I had two water bottles, a rifle and plenty of ammo. The Sarge, though, thought otherwise and when I saw him checking his pack in the back of the cruiser it suddenly dawned on me that maybe he knew something about buffalo follow ups that I didn't. Also in the few weeks I had worked with old John I had got the idea that 'not far' to him could mean a long day's walk. The old Sergeant smiled when he saw me walk over and collect my pack. "Good thinking Sah! Also, it is going to rain". It was late October and there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and hadn't been for months - longer really as we had suffered five years of devastating drought. "What do you mean it's going to rain, Sarge" I asked. He pointed with his toe at a small patch of moving earth under a tree. It was an emancipated African Bullfrog digging its way out from where it had been hibernating. I hadn't seen one since my early teens as there hadn't been enough rain for them. The Sarge smiled- "The frogs know that the statue is back up and the drought is over. It is going to be a good rain before tonight". The senior witchdoctor and tribal rainmaker had declared that there would be no rain until Cecil Rhodes' Statue had been put up again. When the communists came to power the old symbol of Imperialism had been quickly removed- and it hadn't really rained since. As we had left town the day before we had seen the preparations for the erection of the statue in the Museum grounds with today being set for its re-unveiling. That was a fascinating thought. The communist authorities who officially denied any god, although a few professed to be Roman Catholic, had given in to the witchdoctor and now it looked as if it might actually rain. So much for what we called "mumbo jumbo bull..."

Rain! . . . Rain! . . . I like my water ice cold in a glass or hot out of a shower and no other way, thank you. If it rained you curled up inside with a good book, and didn't go wandering off into darkest Africa looking for trouble. We had no water proof gear, and no warm or even spare clothes and usually didn't even carry a gas stove, preferring to cook over a fire. I had a small camping type one in the cruiser though, for making coffee, and I chucked it to the Sarge to carry and wrapped some spare matches up in a plastic bag and put a tin of fuel for my lighter into the pack just to be sure. If I was going to get wet some coffee would be mighty comforting.

While I was trying to get my act together the Sarge had been making a few adjustments to the personnel order. Our Vet man was to go with John and we were going without one. As usual it was a complex matter of tribal and family ties. The man detailed to accompany us was a Mashona and distantly connected to one of the Parks Scouts. As such he could be counted on to stand by his brethren in a fight. The other man was a

still hear one 303 firing back". I could barely hear anything let alone determine the number of weapons involved. The Magokha had carried a 425 WestleyRichards with a long 28" barrel and that had sounded quite distinct and different from the general popping of small arms fire. I knew that Mlausi's hearing was nearly as phenomenal as his eye sight so I trusted his word. At the same time I already knew enough about bush warfare to know that there was no point in going to try and help. By the time we got there one side or the other would have run away and if the gooks had taken the field we would probably walk into an ambush. Anyway John had three men with him and was closer to the trouble than we were, so we walked on.

The buffalo was where it was expected to be. Lying up under a thick bush, right by the dam wall. He stood up awkwardly as we approached, and folded neatly back down as my bullet took him through the top of the neck. We had been above him on the bank, and thirty metres away with a clear field of fire. Close enough for a snap shot but too far for him to charge. Perfect. Before the Sarge could stop me I had put another shot into his chest, just to be sure. I had been carefully schooled not to trust spine shots. Too many dead animals got up after one and wandered off, sometimes over the hunter. "You Bledy fool boy," snarled Mlausi, "what you fire that second shot for?" I was taken completely off balance and started to try and explain that it was standard procedure to back up any spine shot. I was cut short and the gist of the verbal flogging that followed ran along the lines that, yes you always back up a neck shot unless there was a really first class reason why not to. Under the current circumstances that first class reason was the dissidents-who were a damn sight more dangerous than any wounded buff. One shot will catch your ear but as it is always a surprise, it is hard to place. Any subsequent ones when you are alert and listening for them give you both direction and distance.

A quick glance told us that the buff was dead. There was a nearby road so we could send somebody with a tractor to recover the animal and so, after refilling my water bottles, we set off in the direction of the nearest farm house. The Sarge was in a hurry. Something was worrying him and he seemed convinced that there were dissidents nearer to hand than those whose guns we had heard talking earlier. The mopane gave way to dicrostachias scrub and short acacia trees and the ground became more stony. We stopped for a cigarette and for Mlausi to put on his veld shoes. 'Vellies' were issued free, but most of the time the Sarge went barefoot. A combination of many thorns and sharp stones though, dictated that shoes were essential. "Sah." His voice was soft and urgent. I looked round and saw a jackal standing on top of a low ridge watching us. A jackal out at midday was unusual, but rabid jackals always behaved strangely. We had one walk right into the farm garden where we were staying and snuggle up behind John. John thought it was the farmer's dog and had scratched its ears for a while before realising. It had tested positive for rabies. Two days earlier I had shot a jackal that was trying to chew the door of the cruiser to get at us. We had been stopped at a dip tank and were just having a good look around for gooks before we moved forward when the jackal had rushed up snarling and snapping at the vehicle. The game scout in the back of the vehicle had clambered onto the cab roof and I had reached through the window and shot it with my F.N. pistol. The door had been covered with saliva and we were certain it was rabid although the results wouldn't be back for some days. The two incidents had caused considerable fear

amongst the game scouts. Both John and I had been vaccinated against rabies, but the 'scouts hadn't. At least one man had died horribly in Nyamandlovu hospital right at the beginning of the outbreak. The fact that the medical authorities had done their level best to keep the poor man alive at the hospital didn't help matters. It had just prolonged his suffering. One of the Vet scouts had subsequently gone down with rabies as well, despite receiving timeous treatment for the bite (it was Makola virus, a rare and untreatable form of Rabies. Pre vaccination, however, was regarded as reasonable protection.) He had been lucky. His brother was a policeman and he had walked into the hospital and shot him as he lay writhing, chained to the bed. All in all, to say that the 'scouts were terrified of rabies would be a classical understatement.

The Jackal decided we were the enemy or whatever and ran straight towards us, head stretched right forward, tail straight out behind. Mlasi grabbed for his rifle. "SAH!" There was an almost hysterical note of urgency in his voice. The 9,3 came up smoothly and the 293 grain TUG hit the jackal low in the chest, slicing it open from stern to stern and neatly eviscerating it. One second a charging jackal, the next an almost perfect rag mount. Flat on the ground, legs splayed, but head still up with mouth open. It was only six paces away. "Thanks Sah!" The Sarge was clearly very relieved and any form of thanks from him was high praise indeed.

I reloaded while waiting for Mlasi to finish putting on his velvies and topped up the cartridge belt. If Mlasi's premonition that there were anti-social people closer than I thought was correct, I might just need all available ammo and that last shot would just confirm to anyone interested the direction of our travel. My previous experience of terrorists, dissidents and sundry other hostiles mainly consisted of being shot at, and occasionally returning fire. The last time I had bumped into dissidents on foot was a year earlier while hiking in the Matopos. The meeting near the top of a kopje had been an equal surprise for both parties and we had smiled nervously at each other and backed away without a shot being fired.

We set off again towards the house. I suggested running, but Mlasi shook his head and turned off the winding road to take a direct route through the bush. We proceeded cautiously up the side of a stony kopje from where the farmhouse could be seen. The gate stood open and there was no activity in the adjacent work shop area. The farm was obviously abandoned (in fact the farmer and his wife had been killed a few months previously and most of the labour shot by the army in reprisal). Still, the phone would probably be working and we could shelter from the obviously developing storm, cook some food and coffee and hold a reasonable defensive position until we were collected. As I voiced this to Mlasi he shook his head and pointed off to the left. At first I could see nothing, but then I saw movement and through the bino's this resolved itself into a long line of men carrying AK's but wearing blue denim taking up position to cover the access road to the house. "They are inside as well" said Mlasi. I switched the bino's to the house windows and sure enough there was a denim clad man watching the road through binoculars. It was a heavy blow for me. I had been sure that any trouble was far off to the west where we had heard the shooting earlier but there was no doubting who comprised the reception committee. "They are Gunfighters men." said Mlasi. "How do

you know?" I asked, both surprised at the surety of the pronouncement and concerned as well. Gunfighter was a notorious leader who commanded a gang of at least 100 men. Apart from kidnapping and murdering a few tourists he was most noted for joining up with a large gang lead by "Danger" and attacking a police convoy in the Matsop killing over seventy police recruits who were on their way to a training camp. His was a particularly dangerous gang, well equipped and well led. A part from his one foray to the south to help "Danger" he had previously only operated in the north, in the Gwayi forests and occasionally as far east as the Shangani and Ntuba-Zika-Mambo mountains. "See he is standing there organising the ambush," said the Sarge. "How do you know it is him?" I asked turning the binoculars to look in the direction indicated. The Sarge snorted in disgust at my lack of trust in his judgement. "He is ex ZIPRA," was the reply, "and I fought against him once in the Hondo," (the Rhodesian bush war). "See he wears a soviet hat with a star on the front and carries a PKM". Mlusi's eye sight still leaves me in wonder to this day. The man was largely concealed by vegetation and the best part of a kilometre away. Even through a good set of \$ power bino's, the best I could make out was that he was indeed wearing a Russian style pointed hat of the type popular with senior ZIPRA commanders, and that he was in fact carrying a machine gun rather than an AK, since I could see the belts draped over his shoulder. As for the star and the model of machine gun ... I accepted Mlusi's view. There seemed to be an awful lot of men down there.

It slowly sank in. Gunfighter had as many men with him as I carried rounds in my belt and pack. Mlusi had only three magazines for his G3, but he was also a notoriously lousy shot. Anything smaller than an elephant at ten paces was relatively safe from his bullets. His skill as a poacher had been entirely due to his ability to get close enough to any animal to virtually stick the rifle in its ear. "Let's get out of here. Fast!" I whispered, almost as if my voice might carry a clear kilometre to the waiting men. Mlusi ignored me, turning very slowly his eyes scanning the bush for anything. I picked up the bino's and made a detailed search of the bush to the south west which was the shortest route to a known occupied house.

Finally Mlusi stood up carefully. "There are more of them between us and the main road (which was east of us), and others somewhere behind. We had better make for the next farm." It hadn't even occurred to me that we should head off the thirty odd kilometres to the main Victoria Falls Road through hostile communal and forestry land. The forestry commission at Sawmills was probably the closest government post about 15 km of to the north somewhere, but Mlusi seemed sure that there were men back there somewhere on our trail. We set off moving carefully from rock to rock and then across a hard capped stretch of red earth. Mlusi sent me ahead and then moved carefully backwards, gently blowing on even the faintest marks. It probably took us twenty minutes to cover two hundred metres. Then we were moving out at a reasonable pace through a thickly wooded area along a hard packed trail that would leave virtually no tracks. I tried to ask the Sarge what his plan was but he just shook his head and kept focussed on the bush ahead.

We had gone about a kilometre and were approaching another low, stony kopje when we heard the roar of several automatic weapons and shouts of panic from just over the ridge.

At that distance there was no mistaking the sound. They were AK's firing. Mlusi grinned, his smile almost reaching from ear to ear. "iKhanka," (Jackal) he said happily. "The gang that got the 'Magotha' don't like rabbits either!" The shooting had stopped abruptly and an angry voice had stilled the shouting. "Now," said Mlusi "it is time to run". We took off at a fast run, and then branched off onto a side trail and kept going. It was the pace I would have run at in the 800 metre race at school, but then I didn't have to run with a pack and rifle. Also the finish line was only two laps of the track away. By the time we slowed to a trot I was completely blown, but so was the Sarge. We slowed to a walk on the other side of a wide vlei and after walking past a low hill doubled back to see if anybody was following.

They were, and there were too many to contemplate shooting it out with. I could see at least a dozen men moving down through an open space towards the vlei. "That gang has met up with some others that were sent to look for us" said the Sarge. "Bledy Jackal, the shooting must have bought the others running thinking there was a contact." "Well, we've got a good lead and we can out pace them until we find some suitable terrain for anti-tracking and can loose them." I commented. "No!" said Sarge, as he sat watching a thin trickle of dust pour out from his hand and blow towards the approaching gooks, "I am tired of running! It is time for a good fire! That will put them off and the rain will soon put it out anyway." Even as he spoke I heard the distant rumble of thunder.

Our pursuers would soon be entering the vlei with its long grass and dense reeds. "Give me your flares and the lighter fluid." We were already running back to send the kopje back to the edge of the vlei. My lighter fluid! I was very proud of my Zippo lighter but proper fluid for it was impossible to buy in Zimbabwe, but I had grown tired of the first few drags tasting like petrol or benzine and had gone to great length to obtain a couple of cans of lighter fuel. Oh well, better being a live man to order more than have someone collect the can from my pack. I also carried a good supply of pencil flares for signalling. They weren't actually that great and could only be seen over limited distances and if you weren't careful to ensure that they were fired straight up they would invariably still be burning when they hit the ground, necessitating rushing over and putting the resultant fire out before it took hold. A few of those going off in the thick grass of the vlei would certainly start something! We stopped beside a small boulder nestled up against a solid looking knob thorn tree that gave an elevated view of the last 50 yards or so of the path through the vlei. Mlusi took a packet of flares, my lighter and my precious can of fuel. He handed me his G3 though after changing the magazine. "You stay here behind cover. When the first one steps into the open on that path, shoot him with your rifle. Then fire a flare straight up - they will think we are calling help. Then take my rifle, it is on full auto and put bullets along where that path runs. The magazine is full of tracers which will probably start a fire, and you maybe lucky and hit somebody. Also it will make them believe that there are more than just two of us."

With that the Sarge ducked off and a short while later I saw him kneeling on the edge of a thick clump of tall reeds just inside the vlei line. Everything was dry, even in the vlei. Every fallen stick was turning to powder fine dust and I wondered what had happened to

the termites who would have normally cleaned up most fallen vegetation. Even they seemed to have died out or gone into hibernation.

I lost sight of Mlausi and concentrated on the path for a few moments. Nothing moved. I looked around for the Sarge and it took me a while to see him. He was further down the vlei laying another fire ready. The wind wasn't quite from directly behind and swinging a few degrees with each gust and the path through the vlei wasn't straight but ran on a slight diagonal from our left (the north). The Sarge was obviously planning on a fire on a broad front that was sure to catch them in its path even if the wind shifted a bit. It was also getting dark. It was coming on for late afternoon anyway but the storm was building out of the west and dark thunder heads stretched from horizon to horizon.

When I looked back towards the path I got a huge fright. Three denim clad men were already in sight and moving cautiously along the path watching the hill for trouble. Both rifles were already wedged into position facing down the path, and I was leaning against the rock with the butt of the 9,3 nestling against my shoulder. In that glance I saw that the lead "Man" was a boy of about 14 who was carrying a bolt action Lee Enfield rifle - obviously an acquisition off a Vet man or perhaps some murdered farmer. The second man had an AK while the third who had just come into view around the bend in the path carried an RPK light machine gun. He was obviously the officer with one piece of cannon fodder and a good scout ahead of him. I pushed the trigger forward on the Bruno to set it and as I glanced along the sights I saw the AK armed man freeze and glance in the direction Mlausi had gone. The officer behind also froze, which helped, since my heart was beating like a two stroke: I was out of breath, my hands were sweating and I could hardly force the focus off the man and onto the sights. The gold bead hovered briefly about the bottom of the V rear sight and I touched the trigger. Everything changed in the rear of that shot. The vlei spat a torrent of bullets in my direction. I could hear them cracking overhead, whining off the rocks and got a splinter of wood stuck in my arm as a bullet tore through the branch of the tree above me. Even as I shrank down into cover behind the rock I scooped up the flare pistol with my left hand and let one go, arching high and red over the vlei. With my right hand I gripped the G3 which was wedged into the fork in the tree pointing vaguely in the right direction and squeezed the trigger. A short burst of tracer tore through the vlei and up into the sky above as the loosely held rifle pulled free of its perch. I gripped it strongly in both hand, canted it as far off to the left as I could and still get a reasonable purchase with the butt on my shoulder, and squeezed off a long burst. The rifle squirmed in my hands and the recoil forced the bullets up and to the left, which was perfect as it automatically walked bullets along the direction the path took through the vlei. The magazine ran out, so I scooped up the 9,3 and fired a couple more shots with that and then switched to my pistol and blazed off half a magazine as quickly as I could pull the trigger in the hope that they would think that there was somebody on our side with an SMG.

I remembered to glance down at the path ahead of me. And was surprised to see the scout lying full in the path with his arms flung out sideways. Of the officer I had fired at, I could only make out his feet sticking into the path. The rest of him was obscured by reeds. Suddenly the view of the path was blotted out by smoke. I looked around and saw

that a good hundred yard frontage of vlel was ablaze and the Sarge was scuffling back towards me on all fours using some small rocks and a slight depression as cover. He was carrying his Enfield .38 revolver by its lanyard held in his teeth, but even though that I could see he was grinning as wide as I had ever seen. I blazed the last two rounds out of the 9,3 into the reeds where the path entered the vlel on the far side just as Mlausi dashed up to the rock and reloaded the G3.

All incoming fire had halted and the vlel was a roaring mass of fire with flames leaping at least 10 metres into the air in places. The Sarge dropped his revolver into its holster and squatted there grinning while he dug in my rucksack side pocket looking for my cigarettes. "You've already got one box of mine. We'll smoke those, and anyway what are you so happy about?" He reached into his pack which he had left leaning against the tree and produced a box of my cigarettes. There was a bullet hole through the box! He managed to fish out two undamaged fags and handed one to me, lit it with the zippo, lit his own and made to put my lighter into his pocket. "My lighter Sarge?" and I put my hand out. Somehow he managed to keep the same wide grin only make it look a little more sheepish as he handed my prized lighter back. I knew he had been eyeing it for quite some time. "What are you so happy about?" I nagged. Finally after a long drag on the cigarette he managed to speak. "I hit their tracker. Dead with one shot in the head, just as you shot the commander!" he beamed, tapping his revolver. Obviously a slightly puzzled look crossed my face for he explained. "It is the first time I have ever hit anything more than two paces away with this. I just pointed and fired at him as he saw me and I hit him between the eyes." He bounced up and down excitedly. That gook had just been plain unlucky. The Sarge must have been a good seventy paces away from him when he had fired which meant he was safe from an aimed rifle shot from Mlausi, and an unaimed snap shot from an anaemic handgun had killed him.

Suddenly above the roar of the flames we heard a terrified scream and almost simultaneously the ammunition on the body or in the rifle of the tracker Mlausi had killed began to cook off. "Is that the one I shot?" I asked horrified. "Yes, but it is not the commander. He fell there." and Mlausi indicated a particularly tall and dark patch of flame which was about where the turn in the path had been and particularly loud crackling indicated ammunition was cooking off there as well. "He is further along the path, so you must have hit him with the G3 or your pistol. Good shooting by us, he!" The scream was cut short by a deep thud which lifted reeds and thatching grass high into the air. "Grenade. Either the fire set it off or he didn't like cooking!" the Sarge was squatting next to me watching the fire with that wide grin still fixed on his face. I was just beginning to work out that I had been responsible for at least two dead men. The vlel was blazing furiously. With deep red flames and a roar almost loud enough to hide the crack of exploding ammunition. Where the reeds were particularly thick the flames leaped even higher into the air but were somehow a much more orange colour. Driven by the wind, it was spreading out but also leap frogging itself with flesh patches of grass catching fire far ahead of the main blaze. It was awesomely horrific.

We finished our cigarettes while I was digging the wood shards out of my arm and taping the wound up with duct tape. We lit the last two intact fags out of the box, and then the

Sarge stood up. "Time to fade". He was still happy. "That fire should give us at least half an hour's lead and shooting the commander will confuse them even further. Maybe they give up." As I turned around I saw a pall of smoke in our direction of travel and then a lightning strike crashed into a hilltop half a kilometre off. Not a good time to take up a position on high ground or shelter under a tall tree. We set off at a brisk walk straight towards the smoke. It was obviously a good veld fire but nothing like the inferno that was the vlei behind us. Another lightning strike not far to our right and another bushfire leapt into being. This one was rather pathetic though, as the cattle had long since grazed the earth bare and there was little enough to burn. The Sarge obviously liked lightning nearly as little as rebd jackals, and we deviated off towards a small kopje that seemed to have some large rocks near its base which would act as shelter. A long our original track the clouds seemed to suddenly reach the ground and a black wall swept over the veld towards us. The bushfire was engulfed by the moving wall of water and we reached the kopje just as the first drops of rain fell and lightning struck a tree two thirds of the way up its side. Two fair sized rocks with a small gap between them near the base offered us a good view back down our trail and towards the gooks. The kopje behind acted as a reasonable wind break. We dug out our flimsy nylon bivvies. Mine was reasonably new so we used that for the roof of our shelter, straddling the gap between the rocks and pinned to the ground behind to form a rather small lean-to. The Sarge's rather ragged specimen was used for the north wall and to cover our packs. Legend had it that the bivvies were reasonably water proof if they were stretched taught, nothing touched them and it didn't actually rain. This proved to be fairly accurate. Within a few minutes of the main storm hitting us we had worked out that nothing was actually going to stay dry. The little drainage trench that I had dug behind the bivvy to stop water running off the hill and into our position proved wholly inadequate to the task and considering the weight of the down pour this was not surprising. Visibility was certainly not more than 25 paces. The Sarge wrapped his sleeping bag around his shoulders and pressed himself against the one rock forming the front of our shelter and with a distinctly terrified expression on his face, tried to keep a vigilast watch down our trail. Although it was only five in the evening it was basically dark with the only light coming from the almost constant flashes of lightning that tore between the clouds and occasionally came crashing down to earth. At least one more bolt struck our kopje somewhere and the ground reverberated with the shock and the crash of the thunder was almost deafening. At times the thunder peeled for minutes on end without a break.

I scabbled around in the Sarge's pack and dug out the gas cooker, and from my own pack the mess tin, coffee and condensed milk. Our shelter may have not been terribly water proof but it did keep most of the wind out so it wasn't too long before the two of us were sitting there feeling slightly more cheerful with hot, sweet coffee going down. After about half an hour when the rain eased considerably and the lightning had moved on, the Sarge insisted that we push on. We packed up as best we could and moved out with a steady light rain blowing in our faces. Far in the distance we could see more lightning flashes as a second wave of the storm built up and moved in. At least nobody was going to follow our spoor. The ground was too hard for most of the water to sink in and everywhere it was flowing fast towards lower ground carrying any traces of a foot print away in seconds. That was the plus side. On the minus though, was that often the water

would flow right over the top of my velv shoes carrying sand particles into them. With each step water squeaked out of the top of the shoes and the sand inside worked on my feet already softened by water. By the time we reached the farmhouse I was finished. My feet were raw, my arm ached and I was enough of cold, wet and fear.

The only problem was that the farmhouse was empty. The gate was locked and no lights showed. At first we thought that perhaps they were worried about the gooks and had the lights off waiting for trouble but repeated shouts brought no answer. We moved round to the compound which was also fenced. There were people inside but our request for admittance brought a warning blast from a shot gun over our heads and a voice told us some too politely to push off, as letting us in would bring either the gooks, or the army down on the farm workers and they didn't want hassles with either side. "Go and sleep at the house on the veranda" the voice behind the shot gun suggested "the boss will be back tomorrow". The lightning flashes from the second front of the storm were getting closer so we turned and walked back to the house.

Climbing over the security fence in pouring rain with the odd bit of lightning far too close by was a very uncomfortable experience. The house was securely locked and bolted but the veranda was a typical colonial one, about ten foot wide and running around three sides of the house. We moved a settee, table and two wicker chairs round to the east side, and I got the stove up and going again just as the full fury of the storm broke in a stunning display of light with lightning reflected sparkingly off the hail. The sheet lightning seemed to roll slowly across the sky in waves, while the forked lightning that smacked into trees and the low hills around appeared many times wider than it actually was. Sitting there waiting for the water to warm up I realized that while the storm lasted we were safe. Nobody was going to move through that!

Coffee and some "chopped dog" (an unidentifiable mash of some form of meat in an unmarked tin) restored body and soul somewhat. However I was soaked, and even wrapping myself in a wet sleeping bag didn't help much. In the face of continual rain and hail the temperature had fallen considerably and I was decidedly cold. "I will sleep now," said the Sarge as he tossed an empty can of something that legend had was left over from the second world war, into the corner. "Wake me at midnight and then I will stand watch until first light. An attack is unlikely before then but they do not like us now so we should still be careful". With that Mlasi curled up on the sofa with his wet sleeping bag draped over himself and in a remarkably short space of time he was snoring gently.

I noticed he had not removed his shoes which was unusual, since he only wore them when necessary and whipped them off at the earliest possible convenience. Also he had set his G3 onto fully automatic and placed it carefully beside the sofa. He had cleaned both it and his revolver to the best of his ability while I was making coffee, and had topped up the empty magazine with some spare rounds that had materialised from his pack. It dawned on me that he hadn't removed his webbing either and he had gone to sleep wearing two magazines and yet another box of my cigarettes in his chest webbing, while the Enfield sat in its full flap leather holster on his right side, lanyard looping up and through the epaulet on his shirt. I tried to remember whether he had fastened the

holster closed but couldn't recall it. Whatever, the Sarge had gone to sleep ready for instant action.

I collected another mess tin of water flowing out from the gutter and putting it on the stove settled down to clean my rifle and pistol. I ran a pull-through through the barrels to dry them out, wiped them as dry as possible and re-oiled the actions. I refilled my cartridge belt from a box in my pack and put the fresh magazine into my pistol. I had fired ten shots from the pistol, and the second magazine hadn't been quite full, so I transferred the last two rounds from the first mag to top it up and left one up with the safety on.

Walking slowly around the veranda with a mug of coffee in one hand, rifle in the other, and a fag firmly in place in my lips I had a chance to relive the day. It wasn't a pretty thought - the central theme being that terrified scream from the wounded man as the wild fire swept over him. It was also time to reflect on the storm. For five years the rains had been minimal. The next day's paper would carry photographs of school children terrified by the sight of rain, since the last time there had been any they were too young to remember. It was exactly as the Ndinda, the witch-doctor at the shrine of Ngelele had said. How could that be? Every year for the last five at the annual "First Fruits" ceremony Ndinda had proclaimed that the statue must be put back up for it to rain. The statue was back and now it was really raining! By what means could Ndinda "see" the future? Who decided that a man should die? Two of the three burnt bodies lying unburied out there in the vlei (where they would be found the next day by the army) had been extremely unlucky to die. Even the section leader had been out of luck considering my heart rate and state of nerves! It was unlikely that I could have missed at that range but I could easily have only wounded him, or his rifle or magazines could have stopped the bullet.

I stopped. There was somebody at the gate. A giant, standing there with his back towards me. The storm had largely moved on, but in each distant flash of sheet lightning I could see him silhouetted. I moved down towards the gate keeping my rifle covered with a thick plastic fertilizer bag I had found. When I got there I was alone. I called out softly but received no answer. I hurried back to the security of the house and my sleeping comrade, and saw the man standing guard at the gate again. I walked openly back towards the gate, looking to see if it wasn't some strange tree formation that looked like a man. It wasn't, but my "guest" disappeared during a dark spell between the flashes just before I arrived at the gate, and left my calls unanswered. Standing once more on the veranda, cold, sad and upset by the men who had died, and more than a little fearful for the coming day, it slowly dawned on me that there was more to this earth than I presently understood, and that it might be a prudent idea to find out the whole truth. At midnight I awakened Misasi carefully lest he tried to shoot me. With a mug of coffee in hand and another of my cigarettes going he listened while I explained about the man at the gate. He said nothing but walked to the corner of the house and waited. The lightning was a long way off and there were few flashes close enough any longer to light up the figures at the gate. I felt like a complete fool for talking ghosts to the Sarge, as we stood peering into the dark. "See anything Sarge?" I felt really small, but to my surprise he said "yes, there is something there. I just cannot quite make it out". As he

spoke there was a distant flash of sheet lightning that turned the whole eastern horizon dull orange. The huge man standing at the gate was clearly outlined. I saw a flash of white teeth in the dark as the Sarge smiled. "He is one of your people, sleep easy Umfan (child), I will keep watch with him and wake you at dawn if it is necessary." "What do you mean 'One of my people'?" Again, a smile and a shake of the head. "Ask your God and you will learn, but anyway, we are safe" I could get nothing more out of him and he ignored my questions and settled down to warm another unblebed tin of something inedible (to anybody but a very hungry man in the dark), so I curled up on the sofa and was asleep before I could start to think about the Sarge's words.

I awoke to the sound of pots clanging. It was a bright and beautiful morning with the sun already creeping over the horizon lighting up a freshly washed world. The farm's cook had come up from the compound at first light and let Mlausi in, and while he was raising HQ on the agric alert (Fama radio network) the cook had got on with preparing a first class meal.

We had quite a long day ahead of us. John arrived mid morning with his three men in the landrover. They had got their buff and on the way back found the remains of the Magotcha and his stick. Four gooks had also died at the scene of the fight. Three of them torn apart by the big .425 soft points, even though it was apparent that the Magotcha had been hit in the initial burst of fire, since he hadn't even managed to get off the path. One Vet man had been killed at the outset but the other reached a shallow donga and made a determined stand before being killed. John said there were about 50 spent cartridges for his .303 lying around his body. It was a pity he didn't shoot well as he had killed only a single opponent and wounded two. Gunfighter and his gang had hit the Forestry station at sawmills just after first light. More than thirty staff had been killed and the logging plant destroyed. Three of the gooks were eventually found by helicopter and killed but not before they had shot one down. A police landrover coming to meet up with us hit a land mine (the only one to my knowledge in the "dissent war") and five policemen killed.

All vet ops were cancelled and a week later I started end of year exams at University. Another couple of hair raising incidents and seven years later I finally worked out the real story of that night, but to this day I cannot see the connection between Rhodes' statue and the rain in Matabeleland!