



Three Tons Of Trouble

THE AMERICAN HUNTER

By Peter Hathaway Capstick

It was a typical midwinter afternoon in late July, the sun warm and bright, yet the shadows oddly chilly in the dry Zambian air, when we broke for water and a cigarette under a *Brachystegia* tree near a vast ocean of tall, brown grass. We had been walking for two hours, hoping to cut the fresh spoor of a herd of evasive roan antelope I knew to be in the area. My clients, an American and his nineteen-year-old son, plunked down gratefully and the rest of my six trackers, skimmers, and gunbearers hunkered, wrapping black shag tobacco in scraps of newspaper and smoking them with a smell like a hotel fire. Silent, laid up with a bad bout of malaria, was back in camp, and I was using a young Senga tribesman local to the area as a guide to the region, since we were many miles from my normal hunting grounds.

We all heard it at the same time, a strange sound like a distant locomotive chuff-chuffing, then another joined with it. I felt a shiver of apprehension as it dawned on me what the sound was: rhino, and coming this way fast. We got to our feet, straining to locate the noise exactly, the thudding of thick, short feet now audible with occasional squeals, muffled by the grass. Grabbing the rifles of the Americans, I handed them to my men and started them climbing with a boost up the tree. We had no rhino license, and I didn't want one of my bucks belting one of them in possible self-defense. I kept the .470 and got behind the wide trunk as my men dispersed similarly. Fifty yards away the grass waved wildly, stirring as the surface of the sea would just over the back of a couple of big sharks. As I watched from behind the tree, the grass exploded with a cow rhino, then a big bull, then yet another bull. The first bull had a nasty gore wound on his flank and the second began to overhaul him, slashing at his rump with his thick front horn. I held my breath as the cow thundered right by the tree, oblivious to our presence, followed by the males, snorting and foaming, to disappear into the bush 30 yards away. I mentally wiped my brow at our near involvement and was about to step back into the open when there was a particularly savage snort and a shout of fear from somebody in the direction the rhinos had passed. I immediately ran into the cover, the big rifle ready, hoping to hell I wouldn't have to use it.

As I got closer, I could make out the form of a bull rhino dashing in figure eights around a buffalo thorn tree, in the very top of which was Charlie, the local guide. From 20 yards away, the rhino stopped and stared myopically at me, snuffing for my scent. Taking a chance

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**Facing A Raging Rhinols
Like Standing In The Path
Of A Runaway Locomotive.**

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before he took the initiative, I fired the first barrel between his front feet, stinging him with earth and pebbles from the slug. No good. He lowered his head and charged me with the speed of a polo pony. Close at hand was a climbable tree, so I took another chance and, holding carefully on the base of his second horn as he quartered toward me, I fired the second barrel. It caught the horn squarely and flattened the bull with the impact of the blow of 5,000 foot-pounds of bullet energy. In a few seconds he was back on his feet, wobbling around like a punch-drunk fighter until he finally took off straight through the bush and left for good.

When we got the party back together, I noticed that Charlie was not there, and we all went back to the tree where I had seen him roosting. When the rest of my men saw him, they collapsed with laughter, howling and rolling on the ground. In his haste to get away from the rhino, which had seen him and doubled back, he had chosen a very poor refuge. The buffalo thorn, or *Urophaga* as it's called locally, is a solid mass of the crudest thorns imaginable. Charlie, in his haste, hadn't even noticed them on his way up; now it was a different story. Bleeding like a butchered hog, he couldn't figure out a way back down through the barbed branches. Perhaps the essence of humor is the unexpected, and despite the fact that poor Charlie was obviously in pain and punctured like a pincushion, his ridiculous expression of misery soon had all of us laughing until the tears flowed. Finally, one of the men tossed him a *ponga*, and he was able to clear his return partially, although he needed a quart of Mercurochrome by the time he reached terra firma once more. I saw the rhino with the shattered second horn a couple of times over the next few years, so he was no worse for wear from the incident.

The word "unpredictable" applies well to most of Africa's dangerous game, but the black rhino certainly demonstrates this trait to a greater degree than any other animal. It's likely that the problem lies in their very poor eyesight as much as with their rattle-brained IQs. I cannot recall a single instance of meeting a rhino that suspected my presence in which the animal did not advance, often in a series of half-circles, to test the wind with their excellent noses. The slightest sound, such as the click of a camera or rifle safety, will be heard and will precipitate a full charge. The rhino is gifted with astonishing speed and incredible grace for an animal that may weigh three tons, the second largest of the land animals. I have always enjoyed reading the fanciful renderings of people like Jean-Pierre Hallet in his *Congo Kirabu*, in which he smugly tells us how

simple it is to sidestep a rhino's charge. It may make nice reading, but this is one boy who knows better! A full-charging rhino can stop in his own length and change direction faster than a mongoose. If you don't want to get hammered, you had better get up a tree, throw him a jacket or other piece of clothing to gore, or kill him. If you are armed, rhinos rarely follow through with a charge in the face of fire. A horn shot will turn most charges and a shot over the head or into the ground often will do the same.

Of course, it would be ridiculous to presume that all advancing rhinos are actually warming up for a charge. The problem is that you just can't tell; probably the rhino doesn't know itself what it's going to do.

The utter destructive power of a rhino's charge has been exhibited frequently in East Africa, where several railroad locomotives have been attacked and occasionally derailed! In most cases the rhino was killed — some compensation to the railway company. For the most part, the rhino is a tosser, lacking the free-lance finesse of the elephant. I have the impression from experience that they tend to close their eyes a few feet from their target, although it may be that they are just squinting with concentration like a rifleman over his sights. At any rate, if one connects, you are probably not going to be very happy with the situation at all. Colonel Patterson, the great bwana who bungled his way to success with the coolie-cating lions of Tsavo, mentions a case that, if true (and I see no reason for him to fabricate here when having been fastidious with the veracity of his other tales), unquestionably accounted for the largest loss of human life by a rhinoceros at a single go. Twenty-one slaves were chained together by the neck on their way to the coast to be shipped. Passing through a thick stretch of bush, a rhino boiled out of some cover and spitted the middle man of the string, the impact of the charge breaking the necks of the remaining twenty men.

I doubt that any student of African hunting would contest that a man called J. A. Hunter, one of the finest professional safari operators and government hunters of East Africa, had more experience with rhinos, particularly the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) than anyone else. All in all, especially during the biologically tragic "Great Makueni Rhino Hunt," Hunter killed more than 1,000 personally, mostly on orders from the government. The Makueni Hunt was forced by the decision to open up large tracts of new land for resettlement of the Wakamba tribe in the Machakos District of Kenya about the middle of this century. Since the bush area was practically crawling with rhinos, many of whom had killed women gathering firewood, Hunter was ordered to clean them out so the bush could be cut. A basic

reason for cutting the bush was to deprive tsetse flies of breeding grounds. More's the shame that after the rhino were slaughtered, the scheme never came to fruition, the great animals wasted.

Now nobody, not even a man like Hunter, goes off into very thick bush to kill 1,000 bull butterflies let alone rhinos without a consequent number of hairy encounters. Hunter himself was never caught, but some of his native hunters or scouts had some stories to tell their grandchildren. In one case, during a triple charge in very dense cover, Hunter had killed a bull and a cow when a third, another bull, whipped past him with one of his scouts hanging on the animal's horns for dear life. J. A. risked a shot and collapsed the bull, the young man's body shooting forward from the momentum. Convinced that he had killed both the scout and the rhino, Hunter was overjoyed to see the boy move. The bullet had missed him by fractions of an inch. When the rhino, surprising the scout, had lowered his head for the toss, the boy had desperately grabbed the front horn and held himself clear while the rhino bulled off with him clinging like a tickbird.

Since rhinos are quite individual looking, one can often recognize the same one time and again. One such animal that I particularly remember was a big bull that lived alone near my camp on the Munyamadzi River, often wallowing and drinking within sight while we ate breakfast. Except for one burst of bad temper, in which he tried to eviscerate a Game Department vehicle, he was quite tame and was known locally as "Ralph" or "Lalph" by the Chenyanja-speaking tribesmen, who could not pronounce the letter r. One day, driving by, I pulled the Rover over in surprise. Ralph stood by the roadside looking like he'd been recycled. His front horn was ripped half off and hung over his nose like a nightcap, his flanks and legs tatters of flesh. Obviously, he was in horrible pain and dying. From his rear end hung a large piece of intestine, ripped free by a pack of hyenas. I would have given anything to have put him down, out of his misery, but the law strictly forbade dispatching any wounded animal found. It was inhumane, but would have given poachers an excuse to murder wholesale, then claim their prey was hurt and killed for humanitarian reasons. As it was, Ralph had to suffer another two hours until I could drive over and pick up a game guard who shot him. The Munyamadzi never seemed right without him. He had apparently tangled with another bull rhino, or for all I know, an elephant.

The white rhino is in a very odd ecological position these days. Although badly shot up because of its relative docility a century ago, there are some areas where the species is quite numerous, especially in South Africa. Despite the overall rarity of

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these beasts, some are cropped annually because of overpopulation, or exported. A friend of mine in Rhodesia recently obtained several from, I believe, the Natal Parks Department, and they are doing very well on his ranch where they once roamed naturally.

Although man, more than any other factor, has been responsible for the downfall of the rhino, a large percentage of the dead were a result of the animal's simple inability to cope with natural conditions of existence. In time of drought, the elephant packs his trunk and heads off to greener pastures; failing that, he digs and tusks his way to water in dry riverbeds. Not the rhino. He stands around wondering what the hell's going on, then eventually falls over. Some enterprising chap whacks off his horns and retires for a six-month beer drink with the money he gets for it. He breeds slowly, and the very size of the critter precludes short generations. When you think about him, the wonder is that he's still around at all. And that's more than a shame. Thickets just don't have the same adventurous allure without the possibility of a snoozing rhino hammering down on you at any time. He ain't much, but I'll sure miss him. We've had some good times together. ■