

# Double Take on Elephant

By J. M. BARKER

**As the bull went down, another charged from nowhere, screaming like a banshee**

**P**ERCHED HIGH above camp in a fragrant cinnamon tree, a tropical bird endlessly repeated the first four notes from the refrain of Stars and Stripes Forever. And down below, under the shade of a faded green tarpaulin, I was breakfasting on thick toast and Vietnamese tea brewed strong enough to disguise the iodine taste of pills used to purify the jungle water. It was April, 1963, in the central highlands of the Indochinese peninsula.

"Les Montagnards ont des nouvelles d'elephant," said Ngo Van Chi, my Vietnamese guide.

So at that moment I was interested in neither breakfast nor the exotic bird. Two excited Montagnard tribesmen had brought news that a bull elephant had moved through the area during the night, trampling some rice paddies and smashing straw shelters. They described its size and motions in elaborate pantomime, for neither Chi nor myself understood the tribal dialect. Demonstrating how it trampled the rice, they hunched their shoulders, walked in a swinging shuffle, and made circles with their arms to indicate the circumference of the tracks.

These tribesmen were asking me to shoot the elephant.

Well, I needed no engraved invitation and was quite willing to postpone my hunt for gaur to go after a tusker. The Montagnard villagers hungered for fresh meat. But even more than they hankered for elephant steaks, I wanted to track and shoot a good specimen of what, for me at least, is the world's most interesting game. Under some conditions it is the most dangerous game, and under usual conditions it offers a very demanding hunt. Whether in the scrub forest of Central

Scattering bamboo in all directions, the enraged beast crashed into sight five yards away from us







I pose in front of borrowed Vietnamese army jeep



Chi (left) joins me in relaxing on elephant that charged

## Double Take on Elephant

continued

India, the sun-baked bush of Tanganyika, or the Kenya highlands—no matter what the climate, vegetation, or terrain—there is a prolonged suspense to elephant tracking that holds unlimited fascination for all who have tried it.

I tossed a camera and a handful of .458 Magnum solids into my musette bag. Chi festooned the Montagnard trackers and a couple of extra porters with canteens, jungle axes, rifles, and rattan knapsacks loaded with enough provisions for a three-day trek.

We jounced out of camp in my rented Land Rover and headed southwest on a surfaced road. We cut off the highway and wound upward on a sinuous clay road through country that reminded me of the Great Rift in Tanganyika where, with my wife, Barbara, I had hunted in 1959. During that six-week safari I collected a lion that pegged out at over 10 feet and, in addition to the usual plains game, shot better-than-average heads of Cape buffalo, oryx, roan, eland, and elephant.

I'm 38, and Barbara and I have three children, all of whom are with us in Saigon. As a foreign service officer with the U. S. Information Service, I publish magazines and other materials that tie in with American efforts and interests here. A graduate of Northwestern University and at one time director of the Northwestern University Press, I call Evanston, Illinois, my home town, though I've been overseas almost four years. I did a two-year tour in the Philippines, had a shorter assignment in Turkey, and then wound up in Vietnam. Fortunately, since I love to hunt (in one of my forays in Mexico I shot a 200-pound jaguar near Tepic), my present job calls for some travel into the boondocks of Southeast Asia.

Soon the road we were following became an oxcart path threading through hills that were alternately covered with pines and dense bush. Occasionally there was an open glade. The trail ended in a Moi village enclosed by a spiked bamboo palisade—small protection against communist guerrilla attack.

The Moi, which means savage in Vietnamese, were called Montagnards (Highlanders) by the French, who governed Indochina until 1954. Migrant people of hazy ethnic origin, they may have come from the Malay Peninsula or Indonesia in the distant past. Their dialects are akin to the Polynesian tongues. They are darker, heavier, and rounder-eyed than the slender Vietnamese invaders who forced them into the mountains and plateaus where for centuries they have lived seminomadically as primitive farmers and crossbow hunters. Short shrift from outsiders has made them suspicious and shy, but they can become embarrassingly hospitable to the alien who proves his good intentions.

A palaver with the village elders disclosed quite a bit. The almost uninhabited area in which I would hunt was often traversed by Viet Cong (communist) guerrilla bands, so it would be necessary to keep on the move, hoping for no chance encounter with a roving patrol.

We learned, too, that during the previous night a big tiger had broken into a pen and killed two young work buffaloes—a major loss to the village. I left instructions to drag the remains of one carcass into the jungle and build a shooting blind nearby. But our thoughts



Our two elephants' tusks, not big by African standards, but whiter and denser



Chi watches camera as Nam poles boat



Village elder performs ceremonial dance before tremendous feast



Montagnard totes ax, crossbow, arrows, bamboo canteen

were with elephants. A tiger in Vietnam, though a beautiful trophy, is a common pest and is easily shot over bait, often by flashlight at night after hours of tiresome waiting.

We drove as far from the village as the terrain permitted, then marched on foot, climbing single file into the high country. It was 10 a.m., a late start for elephants, but we were hopeful of finding spoor. We walked through level country for a short spell, passing through a savanna of high grass and then a forest of towering trees, dim as the interior of a medieval cathedral. We crossed the Da Dung river by dugout and ascended into rocky country overgrown with young bamboo, green and feathery, where visibility was limited to a few yards. The altitude was over 5,000 feet, and by noon we were soaked with perspiration.

The discouragement that comes with fatigue evaporated like mountain mist when we lucked into elephant sign. Nam, the No. 1 tracker, thrust his bare toes into three cannonballs of dung and pronounced it no more

than an hour old. Chi and I turned over rifles, canteens, and even jackknives to the trackers and porters. With two naked Montagnards casting ahead like bird dogs, we set off at a pace just short of a dogtrot.

On soft ground the tracking was fairly easy, but on the hard, dry slopes there was only occasionally a bent branch of bamboo or a trampled blade of grass to point the way. The practiced eye of the Montagnards could determine from the raw edge of a broken leaf the exact age of the spoor.

After three hours of grueling leg work, of crossing small ravines and gullies, climbing embankments, pushing, crawling, and sweating our way through some of the most punishing terrain I have ever hunted in, we arrived in that mountain fastness where the Asian elephant makes his last stand, deep in a forbidding tangle of bamboo and rattan.

Because of the political convulsions that have shaken Vietnam during the past two decades, there has been relatively little hunting of big (continued on page 87)

## DOUBLE TAKE

(continued from page 35)

game. The wild Asian elephant, now rare in India, Burma, and Thailand, is still plentiful in the Indochinese highlands. The Vietnamese people, for cultural and sometimes religious reasons, care little for big-game hunting. The Montagnards, who are by habit and instinct excellent trackers and bushmen, hunt deer and birds, but only with crossbows, since the national government, worrying about the emergence of a third force, tightly controls firearms. As a result, big game is actually on the increase in Vietnam, though with the occasional harassment of migrating elephant herds by ivory poachers, the big tuskers and their cows stay as far as possible from human habitations. In general, they forage and travel at night. Big tusks are getting rarer, but the over-all elephant population is on the upswing. The same is true with gaurs, the giant, prehistoric, wild oxen.

We knew we were close now. The porters fell back a couple of hundred yards, and the trackers, one looking ahead into the bush and the other watching the ground spoor, moved slowly, step by step. I lit a cigarette to check wind direction; the smoke eddied and swirled, carried by shifting mountain breezes. I worried about giving our presence away, not so much from noise as from the treacherous air currents that carried human scent.

Apparently the animal chose not to retreat. As we rounded a bend on the twisting spoor trail, I looked across a small depression. No more than 25 yards away, and half obscured by bamboo, was a mammoth gray head, ears out and trunk uplifted. The elephant had caught our scent and was trying to locate us.

I moved forward to shoot, and the trackers faded back silently after passing a rifle to me. But it was the wrong weapon. It was Chi's Model 70 Winchester .375 loaded with soft-nose bullets. Chi knows better than to go after an elephant with such ammunition, but he was out of solids and has trouble getting rifle fodder because of government strictures and customs problems.

Three or four seconds went by before I could get into position with my Browning .458 (safari grade), which carried 500-grain solids. As I squeezed off, the animal moved sideways. The classic brain shot was lost, the bullet raking the elephant's side harmlessly. He ran broadside up a steep rise, offering an easy second shot into the shoulder and heart. He crashed to earth, rolling 20 yards downhill, tail over tusks, mowing down saplings and snapping bamboo like toothpicks.

In the excitement and commotion, I hadn't noticed the noise behind me until a second elephant, charging from the rear, screamed like a banshee. Branches flew and bamboo parted, and even though the animal presented no clear shot, we both fired into the

churning, crashing vegetation, hoping to turn the charge. We did, though we didn't actually hit the beast. The gray mass swerved past us at five yards and dove into full view. A snapshot from the .458, which nearly dislocated my index finger, hit him well forward in the engine room, knocking him down and giving me enough time to slip a single cartridge into the empty rifle and finish him off with a brain shot through the top of the skull before he could get up. Chi also put two shots—his last two—into the downed beast, though I doubt that his soft-nose bullets penetrated very deeply.

During the charge, both trackers had decamped in separate directions. There was no obstacle, no tree of any thickness to break the juggernaut attack. The usual rule to escape an elephant charge is to run perpendicular to the direction of the charge, downwind if possible. Nam had done this, but the second tracker had run into the line of the charge. When the animal was hit, it stumbled forward from its downhill momentum, skidded several yards, and fell to earth in the exact place where I had last seen the fleeing Montagnard. I was terribly afraid the beast had fallen on him.

However, he had nimbly skipped aside at the last moment, and I found him standing on the other side of the carcass, calmly rolling some tobacco in a green leaf and appreciatively contemplating the forthcoming feast. I offered him an American cigarette, which he accepted with the traditional bow and quick bob of the head. I gave him a light with a none-too-steady hand.

We had unknowingly been following two bulls all the time. The second, the dangerous one, was the young bodyguard of the older male and had been moving parallel with him. The ivory of both was good—four flawless tusks of matching length and weight. They were not big by African standards, but whiter, denser, and finer grained. Pound for pound, such ivory is more precious to the Indian and Chinese carvers than are the long tusks from the Tana River in Kenya.

I cut off the tails to prove possession and left an armed Montagnard to guard the carcasses. We set off for the car by a different return route to avoid the possibility of a Viet Cong ambush and reached the Land Rover after dark.

After three days, the ivory was easily extracted and brought into camp by a delegation of Montagnards—but not before 300 villagers had made a torchlight trek to the scene and toted off more than 3,000 kilos of meat. They came into camp to thank me for the donation. They were still festive, despite a whopping case of mass dysentery brought on by gorging the unaccustomed rich meat and a mass hangover from the brain-fuddling rice brew that they ferment in great earthen jars and consume during ceremonial occasions.

I returned to my job and house in Saigon with the reaffirmed conviction

that the .458 Magnum is by far the best American caliber for Southeast Asia's big jungle game—elephants, gaur, banteng (another of the big wild bovines), wild water buffaloes, and even the thin-skinned tigers. These species are almost always shot within 20 yards in heavy vegetation, and, with the possible exception of the banteng, all are dangerous when wounded. And they are big. It should be noted that the foot-pounds of energy delivered by the .458 against an elephant or gaur is still less than the proportionate bullet-animal weight ratio of a .22 against a big deer. In close-up shooting, bullet weight, deep penetration from any angle, and knockdown power are infinitely more important than high velocity and flat trajectory—despite some convincing arguments by the small-bore enthusiasts. 181 120

---

## GUN OWNERS

*(continued from page 11)*

and more, both sportsmen and the firearms industry have allowed themselves to be kept on the defensive. They have shown why numerous misbegotten firearms-registration bills couldn't be expected to achieve their proclaimed objective of keeping guns out of the hands of criminals. But until recently, they haven't suggested legislation zeroed in on the criminal.

Now there's been a drastic change of tactics by both sportsmen's organizations and spokesmen for the firearms industry. They have realized that a strong offense is the best defense, and are beginning to act on that realization by urging the enactment of laws aimed directly at criminals who misuse guns. That's the sort of proposed legislation that both sportsmen and the general public will support.

Lowell E. Krieg, Winchester vice-president, is an outstanding exponent of this new policy. "No reasonable person, in or out of the firearms industry," he says, "wants firearms to be used by criminals. By the same token, no responsible person should attempt or desire to limit the free use of sporting firearms by responsible members of society. There is only one way to restrict the use of firearms by criminals—to make the penalty for the use of a gun in the commission of a crime so severe that criminals will be afraid to use one. It is the criminal who should be punished—not the honest citizen."

This system of severe additional punishment for the commission of a crime if its perpetrator is armed has worked out so well in Great Britain that when a British burglar starts out to crack a crib, usually " 'e leaves 'is blinkin' gun at 'ome"—if he owns a gun, which usually he doesn't.

Sentiment for laws providing additional punishment—perhaps doubled prison sentences—for committing a crime while armed with a gun or other weapon is growing rapidly among those