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- Cover: Verney 500 NE AZUR SAFARI box lock with side plates.
- Owner: Arnuld Engelbrecht
- Cover photograph: YVDM • Cover design: Thea Venter

A YANKEE'S YEARNING FOR AFRICA (Part 1)

A safari that lead to a GAME RANGER CAREER

Ed Ostrosky

My rifle squad formed part of a loose perimeter on a numbered hill, somewhere in the I Corps Tactical Zone of Vietnam. I was a second tour light infantryman, a twenty-year-old staff sergeant in an army bogged down in an unpopular war our politicians wouldn't let us win. It was the monsoon season, when rainfall could be best measured in feet, or metres, and as nightfall approached there was little to do but crouch in the scant shelter of our poncho *hootch*, smoke damp cigarettes, and read old letters. Outside, a scant few feet away, was a green-black jungle and the unceasing rain. My mind sought escape and I thought of Africa.

Ever since I had read General Robert L. Scott's hunting classic, *Between the Elephant's Eyes*, I had dreamed of Africa. While everyone else planned to get married, buy a hot car, or go to university when they returned to the 'World,' I looked for employment or hunting opportunities in Africa. But jobs for 'Yanks' seemed to be non-existent and safari costs

in East Africa were far beyond the means of a common soldier, even if I included my monthly \$65 combat pay. Still there might be one possibility. I had received an envelope bearing a Rhodesian stamp and the return address of Rosslyn Farms (Pvt.) Ltd. on the last resupply helicopter.

I groped around in my sodden rucksack, pulled out the plastic bag that contained my letters and writing materials

and wiped my hands on my multi-purpose olive-drab towel. When I opened the limp, mud-stained envelope I found it contained a safari brochure which - in those days of sanctions - consisted of two pages of legal-sized, news-print quality paper. It wasn't smart and glossy but it was my key to a hunting safari in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and a career as a Tsetse Field Officer, game ranger and tracker that would span more than 40 years.

According to the brochure the price of a basic ten-day hunt would be U.S. \$1,750! Sable antelope, waterbuck, zebra, impala, reedbuck and warthog were guaranteed and there would be a good chance of bagging kudu, eland, duiker and grysbok. Dangerous game fees would be extra. A buffalo would cost an extra U.S. \$84, a lion \$112, and an elephant a staggering, but just manageable, \$168. Once I had done my calculations, I figured I could just make it there, hunt, and return before my savings ran out. I took the first watch, and while my squad bedded down as best they could, I cradled my M-14 rifle and thought of pale blue skies and yellow grasslands dotted with game.

Six weeks after leaving Vietnam in 1970, I met Peter Johnstone of Rosslyn Safaris at the Victoria Falls Casino Hotel in northern Matabeleland. As we shook hands, I noted his surprise. The staff sergeant he had corresponded with was barely out of his teens, was used to handling a rifle, and humping a heavy rucksack - definitely not a grizzled veteran out of a WW II movie, or a rich man's son.

An hour later, we were rattling along the Matetsi road, trailing a long plume of grey dust. The sky was a cloudless blue, the grass bleached yellow-white and the mopane grey and largely leafless. As we passed scattered herds of sable, zebra and waterbuck, I could feel the dampness of Vietnam leaving my bones.

When we arrived at Peter's Tsabolisha headquarters, I met his lovely wife, Carol, was shown my room in the spacious old farmhouse, and had a quick cup of tea. But we were burning daylight, time was short, and Peter suggested we go to the range and check the zero of my rifle.

Though I was an expert in the use of light infantry weapons, I knew comparatively little about big game hunting rifles. General Scott had been a great friend of Roy Weatherby and I had followed his example, and had purchased a second-hand Weatherby .300 Mag., complete with a 2.76 x 10 Imperial scope. But life is sometimes cruel, and despite having put a number of rounds downrange with my .300 mag., I disgraced myself. The Weatherby's sharp recoil punched the scope's sharp edge into my eyebrow and I felt the blood running down my nose from what was to become a typical 'Weatherby scar'. Peter had obviously seen it all before and handed me a handkerchief to stem the flow. However, a few hours later, I found myself chatting with Peter and Carol, sipping my first Lion Lager, and watching the red sun sink into the smoky winter haze over Botswana in the distance. The incident was forgotten and all was right in my world.

The next morning was crisp and frosty-cold and I was thankful for my field jacket and gloves when Peter turned the open Land Rover towards Mazambeni. To me, most animals we passed looked to be of trophy quality, but Peter barely slowed as he commented, "Not a bad sable, or waterbuck, or impala, but we can do better." When



Carol Johnstone in the recovery truck

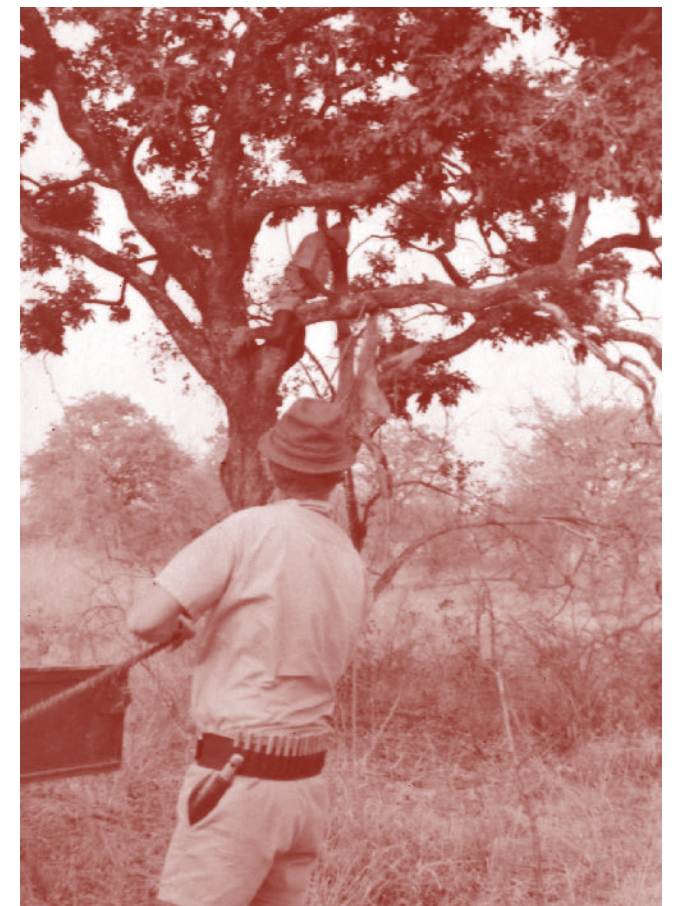
we reached Mazambeni, we left the Landy and continued carefully on foot along the Matetsi River, which, in the late dry season, was little more than a narrow rocky bed with an occasional muddy, green-tinged pool.

We hadn't gone more than a kilometre when tracker, Nadogo, spotted an elephant bull in the distance. "That's a good one Eddie, maybe fifty pounds per side!" Peter said, as I exchanged my Weatherby for the Holland & Holland .375 H&H Magnum Nadogo carried.

The elephant was not alarmed but was walking with purpose, and for the first time I saw how much ground an elephant could cover. We set off at a fast walk, jogging where possible, and tried to get along-side and downwind

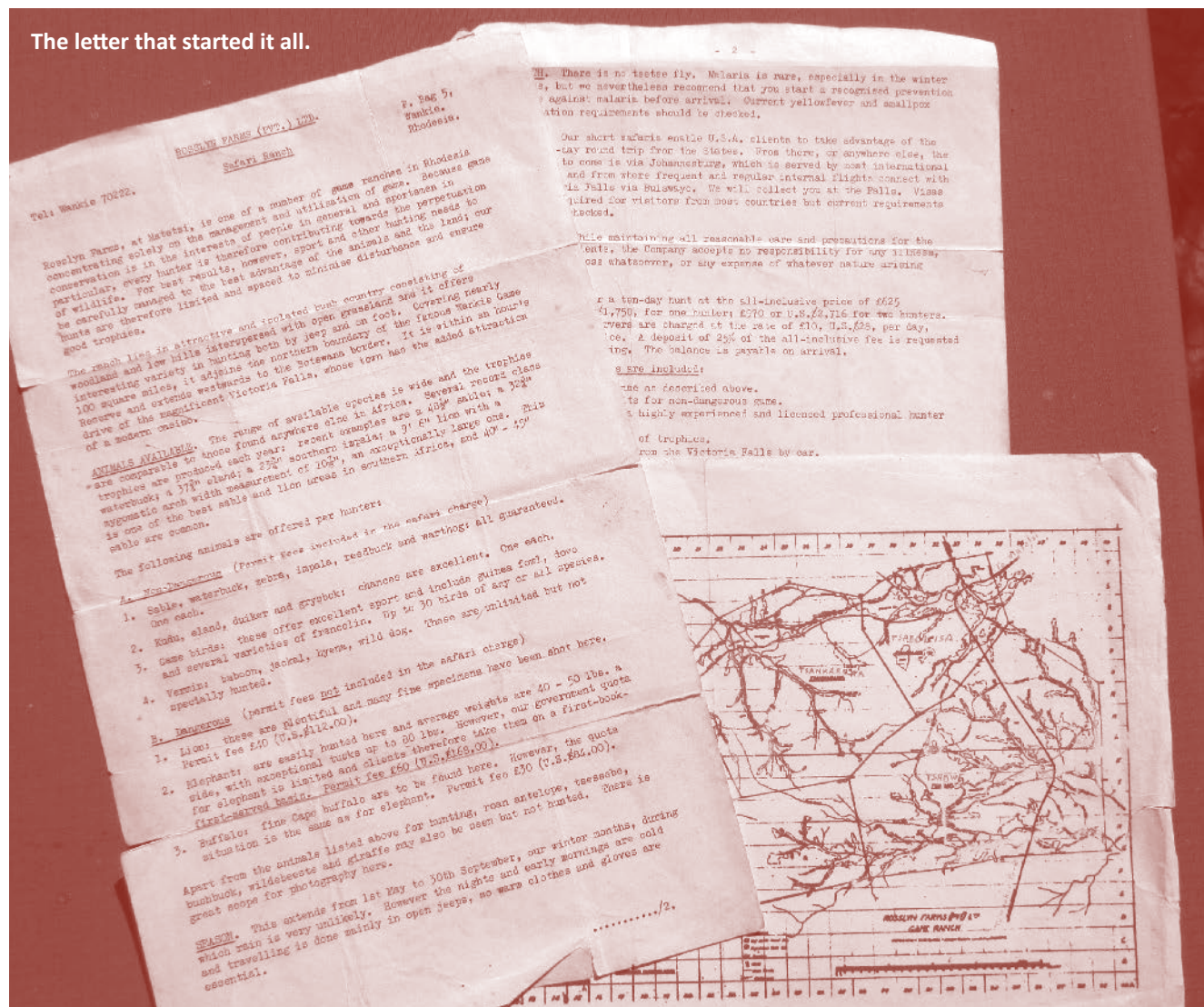


Excellent representative eland



Getting leopard bait up a tree

The letter that started it all.



Leopard taken at last light

of the animal. When we hit a long, steep-sided donga we leapt in and followed its rocky bed until Peter thought we would be near the elephant. However, we were disappointed when we peered over the edge. The fickle morning breeze had betrayed us, the bull had caught our scent, and had set off at a fast pace southwards, in the direction of the Wankie National Park (now Hwange). We followed the bull until late afternoon, when Peter was forced to admit we had no chance of overtaking the elephant, before it left the concession.

After shooting a warthog for a leopard bait and hanging it in a handy tree near the Matetsi River, we called it a day. Though we hadn't caught up with the elephant, I had seen some beautiful country and I felt wonderful! Walking in open country, wearing a pair of 'tekkies' (sneakers), and carrying only a rifle had been a pleasant amble in the park. Peter also seemed pleased to have a client who could walk and hunt seriously.

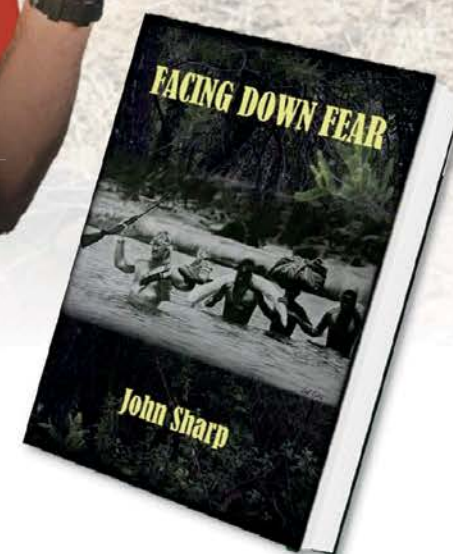
The following day, one of the trackers spotted a herd of zebra as we passed a vleis near Tshowe and Peter brought the Land Rover to a gradual stop. The zebras were not particularly concerned and, as there was plenty of cover, an easy stalk took us to within sixty metres of the herd stallion. I put the crosshairs just behind its shoulder, pressed the trigger and heard the reassuring sound of the bullet



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The Author with his first Zebra

striking home. The stallion tore off through the mopane woodland, but drew up after only a hundred metres and stood swaying with its head down. I was about to give it a follow-up shot when its knees buckled and it rolled onto its side. On checking my shot, we found that the 180 gr soft-point had gone through both lungs and had stopped just under the skin on the far side.

After the zebra was gutted, and covered with thorn branches to keep vultures off, we continued on. We had just topped a stony outcrop when Nadogo muttered, "*impofu*" and dropped into a crouch. Peter pointed out a group of three eland bulls browsing across a rocky hillside in the distance, examined them carefully, and pronounced one to be acceptable. We made a long circular approach and shuffled down a bare, rocky slope on our backsides, until we were within one hundred metres. Peter indicated I should take the big, grey eland bull on the left. I rested my support hand against the trunk of a small mopane tree and picked my aiming point, just behind the bull's shoulder. As I recovered from the recoil, I heard Peter saying, "He's hit, he's hit ... he's down!"

The eland bull was in its prime, weighed in at 1,700 pounds, and had horns which measured a respectable 28 ½ inches. Carol came out with the second Land Rover and a few skinners to collect the carcass, but it still took lots of sweat and effort to get the eland folded into the short-wheel-base load bed.

The following day I shot a kudu cow for lion bait with Peter's milder, but completely adequate, .30-06. After hanging the kudu, we checked the leopard bait at Mazambeni and found it mostly eaten. The bait was hung on the second branch of a likely looking thorn tree, and if the leopard was feeding, my shot would be across a tributary of the Matetsi and a small rocky pool. When Nadogo and Friday had put finishing touches on the hide, we headed back to Tsabolisha where we dozed and relaxed through the afternoon.

We returned to the yellow grass blind well before sunset and for the next couple of hours watched as a mon-goose and several flocks of cackling, helmeted guineafowl drank and scuttled off to roost for the night.

Shooting light was almost gone when we heard a lap-ping sound from the small pool below us. My first thought



Typical outpost in Matetsi in the 70's

was that the sound was made by some late bird, but Peter leaned over and whispered, "It's your leopard, it's drinking at the water hole." And then more softly, "Can you see it through the scope?"

For several long seconds, I could see no sign of the leopard against the mottled background of yellow grass and grey rocks. I was shaking my head sadly when Peter whispered, "Look for its reflection in the water," and then even more softly, "I'd rather you didn't wound it."

Finally, as I scanned the edge of the pool through the scope, I made out the dark reflection of the leopard's head against the lighter grey of the sky, and could see the ripples its tongue made on the mirror-like surface of the pool. For an instant, the crouching leopard came into focus, but before I could think about firing, it vanished.

I searched the area between the pool and the bait tree with the scope set at its lowest magnification and picked up movement. I could see the leopard was quartering away but, in the poor light, had difficulty keeping the scope on it. Then, as it neared the longer grass at the base of the tree, it paused and looked back toward the hide. Afraid the leopard would vanish, or that I would be unable to see it against the darker background of the trees, I held the crosshairs just behind the leopard's shoulder and fired. As the noise of the shot faded, I heard a snarl and saw the leopard on its back with its front paws flailing. I heard Peter say, "Shoot it again", took careful aim at the twisting body, and put my second bullet through its heart. All was quiet. As Peter switched on his big torch, I could see the leopard lying motionless in the grass.

The trackers had heard the shots and as the Land Rover approached, Peter patted me on the shoulder, "Why don't you go over and see if it's dead? Just put the muzzle of your rifle against its head and pull its tail." A moment later I was standing by the leopard in the glare of the lamp. It was truly dead.

The trackers carried the leopard to the vehicle and as I stroked its soft pelt, I felt a twinge of sadness, a moment of regret at having shot such a beautiful animal. But, as we drank tea and ate cold guineafowl sandwiches, I realized I had a more serious problem. I had passed the half-way mark of my hunt, and like Hemmingway twenty years before, I was missing Africa before I even left.

