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JOHN MELLIS

# A trip with the old man

**A hunt with Dad. Angwa River, Zimbabwe, August 1971.**

*While assembling my .470 Rigby, I heard Tseka, a worker from the farm, tell my dad that he and Gutu, who went scouting earlier, found the tracks of five buffalo bulls, about half an hour upstream from camp.*

**W**e were camped on the banks of the Angwa River, about 500 metres from the bridge on the road to Kanyembe. Upon arrival the day before, the villagers told us that the buffalo were coming to the river to drink at night.

It was late August and most of the pans in the bush had dried up. The river had become the drinking place for animals of all shapes and sizes. Although the river was no longer flowing, several pools held water throughout the year. It was at one of these pools that Tseka and Gutu found the buffalo spoor.

Tseka took the canvas water bag and camera and Dad and I, our rifles. We were both using .470 doubles at the time. Tseka led us to where Gutu was waiting at the pan.

We determined that the spoor was not more than a couple of hours old. The dung was still soft and moist, with only a thin skin starting to form. Of course, the drying process was much slower at that time of the morning and the sun was still weak.

From this point onwards, the tracking was slow and difficult. The grass, which covered most of the area, was dry, between calf and knee height and broke off as we passed through. It was evident that there were only a few buffalo. Although they were in no hurry, it still took us about two hours to catch up with them. There were indeed five bulls. Two were lying down and three were standing under some Mopane trees.

The bulls were completely unaware of our presence and continued to chew their cud. Dad and I stalked up to about forty yards from them and studied them carefully. They were all old, mature *dagga boys*, just what we were looking for, all shootable! Dad picked out a bull standing broadside to him and gave it a .470 bullet into the shoulder. Having been so relaxed before the shot, they all woke in a state of confusion.

The wounded buffalo took off. I had a lucky shot and broke its spine. It did a complete somersault and bellowing, as it hit the ground. The rest of the small herd was completely off-guard. They turned to look at the fallen bull and that gave me the opportunity I needed. I picked a broadside target and put the bullet from my left barrel through its shoulders. It went down, bellowing.

The remaining three got the message and disappeared in a cloud of dust. Dad's bull was dead, and I finished mine off with a shot behind the head. They lay within twenty feet of each other and we photographed them where they fell. A great way to spend time with one's father!

After Dad had smoked a couple of cigarettes and drunk a fair bit of water, we took a direct route back to the camp, guided by the local guy. It only took us about an hour to get back, which was a blessing. Dad suffered some injuries to his ankles during the Second World War and walking did not come easy to him.

By the time we got back, Dad was very uncomfortable so we took the Land Rover to collect the two carcasses. It took a block and tackle and two trips to get the buffalo back to camp. Nobody had heard of winches in those days! Most of the meat went to the locals, as it was a condition laid down by the District Commissioner of the area, for the privilege to hunt there and we happily obliged.

## Another day, another buffalo

At about 6:30 am the next morning, Dad and I was about to get into the Land Rover in search of elephants when a local villager arrived in camp, begging us to shoot an old buffalo bull. He claimed it was destroying his vegetable crop at night. We took the story with a pinch of salt as he also claimed that this buffalo lived in the reeds nearby and scared off the woman who wanted to collect water by chasing them!

Although I felt that the story was more fiction than fact and that he probably only wanted some meat, I was only too happy to oblige. We still had a buffalo license.

My father was an extremely perceptive man. He saw the excitement in my eyes and told me to go and have a look. He claimed that his feet were sore from the previous day's walk and wouldn't mind taking it easy in camp while I checked out this rogue buffalo.

I took my .470 and with Gutu and Tseka in tow, followed the villager. It took us about an hour to reach the village below the bridge to Kanyembe.

The man took us straight to his garden, which was on the banks of the Angwa River, near a permanent pool. The garden had a make-shift wood fence around it to keep



The author, his dad, Gutu, their tracker and a local with the old man's elephant.

animals out. He showed me buffalo tracks where it forced its way into and out of the garden again. I could not see a lot of damage, but as it was not my garden and I did not rely on it for my livelihood, I did not comment. I put Gutu on the spoor, which led downstream.

We had only gone a couple of hundred yards when the spoor entered a reedbed. To walk through the dry reeds would cause too much noise. While I was still contemplating going around the reeds, a commotion broke out. A buffalo suddenly stood up, spun around, and glared at us. I nearly had a heart attack but luckily, my head took over. The bull was mere yards away and before he could make up his mind whether to fight or flee, I sent 500 grains of lead into him.

It hurt him a bit, but he recovered quickly and took off. His big broad backside exposed itself to the left barrel of my double so I planted another 500 grains of lead into him. He vanished through the reeds and then silence...

It felt like an eternity but then the sound followed that every buffalo hunter long to hear: a mournful bellow. I knew we had him. We took his spoor. The bull had run about one hundred yards and met his final hour just as he emerged from the reed bed. He was an old, hard-bossed bull with the tip of one horn broken off.

I was met back at camp at 10 am by a very relieved father. Now, many years later and having a son of my own, I realise the agonies he must have suffered whenever I took off after elephant or buffalo. Instead of insisting on accompanying me, he knew he could not walk long distances and would have spoiled the hunt for me. Thank you, Dad, for being a wonderful mentor and friend!

Dad assisted me with the photos and taking the carcass

to the headman, who distributed the meat amongst his people. We kept the backstraps.

After a day and a half's hunting, we had shot three buffalo, all walking from camp. Hunting was indeed a wonderful experience in those days!

### Two men, two elephants

We had two elephant bull licenses and decided to concentrate on these from then on. The District Commissioner at Sipolelo told us to head up the Angwa towards the Mana-Angwa area if we wanted a decent-sized elephant.

We had lunch, got into the Land Rover and drove back along the main road towards Sipolelo, where we turned off along the tsetse fly fences. From there, we took a track to the Angwa and the village headman who knew where to find these elephants. We arrived at the village at about 4 pm. The headman, whose name I sadly cannot remember, assured us that there were plenty of BIG elephant bulls near the village. At that time of year, the fruit of the *Acacia albida* trees in the area was just starting to ripen and elephants loved it! After a chat with the old headman, Dad and I decided to return the next day.

We left camp at about 5:30 am and arrived at the village at 8 am. The headman already sent a couple of youngsters out to check for spoor. One reported back and another guy waited where the spoor crossed the Angwa River. The youngster claimed that they heard the elephants on the other side of the river, so they stopped following them as they did not want to disturb the animals before we arrived. This information sent my pulse rate up a notch or two. There was, and still is, nothing more exciting for me than to track elephants.



Tseka took the water bag and Gutu his axe and the camera. Dad and I loaded our .470's and followed the youngster. It took about half an hour to reach the river, where we met up with the second youngster. We crossed the river over some rocks but we could not hear any elephants. They had moved on.

We put Gutu onto the spoor. There was one really big track amongst the other average ones. It took us about an hour to find the elephants. They had gone into some thick jesse and we heard them long before we saw them. We tested the wind, using the ash-bag, gradually closing in. They were standing next to a big anthill. The big bull was standing broadside, chewing on a root.

We got to about 25 yards from him, but could not get a clear headshot because of the thick bush. The animals were not aware of us. We could barely make out the grey bodies of the three smaller bulls.

Dad fired first, putting a shot into the shoulder of the big bull. I followed up with another shoulder shot. Dad put another bullet into him as he ran. All four animals dashed off into the thick jesse. After a few seconds, the noise stopped. They could only have gone a short distance.

The wounded bull must have been feeling the effects of the bullets. We stood listening, hoping to hear him fall. Nothing. We heard them moving off again but could not see a thing, despite them being not more than 70-80 yards from us... silence.

We were about to take the spoor when we heard a huge body forcing its way through the bush. It was moving in front of us, across from right to left. We stood listening.

The sound was coming closer. We guessed it to be the wounded bull. It sounded not more than 30-40 yards away but still could not see anything. It was scary not to know what he was doing. Maybe he was just sick, looking for a thick bush to rest against and hide; maybe he picked up human scent and was looking for us.

Dad and I were both ready for any eventuality. We had reloaded and stood dead still, listening, staring into the jesse. The animal was moving closer. Then it stopped. Silence again! Everyone in the party was on high alert, listening for the slightest sound. Nothing! After a while, I told Dad that I was going to sneak forward to have a look. The bush was so thick that we could only move in single file. I was young and fit and moved more quietly than Dad with his dodgy ankles. I knew that he hated the thought of me going first but it was the sensible thing to do. Gutu, more or less my age, had incredible eyes and was behind me.

Our progress was slow, one step at a time, trying to avoid any noise. It was pretty uncomfortable, being bent double to get through the jesse.

Twenty yards on, Gutu touched me on my back. I froze as he pointed. About 25 yards ahead was a pair of elephant legs. We could only see from his knees to his feet. At that moment, I was bloody terrified but under no circumstances was I going to let either my father or the trackers know it. Dad knew I was scared; not much got past him. He was probably just as scared, not so much for himself as for me.

Now that we had established where the jumbo was, I had to work out how he was standing to where I was bent



The author's dad holding the bigger tusks. Note the camp's tent in the background.

over in the tunnel-like jesse. All I could move were my eyes and my head. The elephant's shape became clearer. I concluded that he was half-facing us, but not aware of our position. He was sick and near collapse. I could make out one tusk and patches of his head.

Then I made a mistake. I was worried that he was either going to charge us or run away. What I should have done was try to guess more or less where his shoulder was and try to break it. I got clever though and decided to go for his brain. I could

see the part of the tusk where it extended from his lip. I could also see small patches of his head through the jesse. I should have waited but I didn't.

I brought the rifle up and sent a bullet into his head. I was crouched down when I fired. He didn't fall where he was supposed to but was knocked back, exposing his head for a split second. I snapped the left barrel's contents into the side of his head, which brought him down. I reloaded as fast as possible and rushed forward to put a right and left behind his head. It was over!

As Dad forced his way through the bush, I tried to reload but was shaking like a leaf and dropped the



The author with one of the elephants shot.

cartridges onto the ground. I tried to hide this from the old man but I'm sure that he saw. Thankfully he never mentioned it. I sat down for a while to compose myself.

The bull was huge, body-wise, but his tusks only weighed a little over fifty pounds each. We were happy though. After a few photographs and a couple of cigarettes for Dad, we made our way back to where we left the Land Rover on the other side of the river.

Next to the Land Rover stood a boy of about twelve years old. His father sent him to tell us that he had just seen three elephant bulls. He instructed us to come quickly so that we could shoot them. It was music to my ears.

We put the boy in the Land Rover and drove to where



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his father was waiting. Sure enough, there was a fresh spoor of three bull elephants. Two of the three had huge prints. The third was a much smaller animal with prints not much bigger than that of a large cow. The area had been burnt recently so the tracks were easy to see.

According to the local, he saw the elephants a couple of hours earlier and two of them carried big ivory. Over exaggeration was not uncommon. The possibility of a lot of fresh meat increased the need to encourage a hunter by telling him how big the tusks were! However, inspecting the spoor convinced me that the beasts were worth following. There is no better way of getting a dose of adrenaline pumped into a hunter's veins than seeing a big set of elephant tracks, especially when he has an elephant permit available.

Suddenly, the wariness disappears, the feet are no longer sore, and the muscles stop complaining about how tired they are. Even Dad reacted to these two sets of prints, weary as he was. Anyway, he said that he would try for half an hour or so and if, after that time, we had not made contact with the elephants he would come back to wait for me at the Land Rover. The tracks were fresh and it was midday so one would expect the jumbo to be resting under the trees.

Away we went, following the spoor and leaving the Land Rover under large a Natal mahogany tree. We tracked for just over half an hour and my old man was on the verge of quitting when we heard them. In those days we believed that noise to be their rumbling stomachs.

We checked the wind. There isn't a lot of wind at that time of year and whatever there is, it is often unpredictable. There was little on this occasion, so we moved towards the sounds. We left Gutu and the others behind. Dad and I saw the bulls about 40 yards ahead of us. Two were huge, just as we had hoped. The other may have just made 20 pounds aside. We could see one bull clearly and he was a taker! The other, which wasn't as clear to see, was big-bodied but we could not see his ivory. We sneaked closer, maybe 25 paces, when the second bull showed his tusks. They were just as good! It was difficult to work out which was the better bull between the two – both were desirable. If only we hadn't just shot an elephant as we only had the one permit left!

Just then the jumbos started showing signs of uneasiness as if they became aware of our presence somehow. They could disappear at any moment. The first big bull was broadside onto us. The other had turned and was half facing us. I went for the easier target and put a bullet into the ear of the broadside bull. His back legs folded, and he went down, rolling over onto his side as he hit the ground. The other big bull took off and was gone in a second. The smallest bull got a bit aggressive and took a few steps towards us, ears out. We didn't need this as Dad could not run to get out of his way. Fortunately, he only came a few yards, before turning to follow the bigger fellow. I went forward and put another shot into the armpit of our elephant. He didn't need it, but I wasn't going to take a chance with an elephant of that size.



Gutu and Tseka, holding the .470, with the kudu bull the author shot on the last day of the hunt.

After a great deal of admiration and using up the last two pictures on the spool in the camera, I walked back to get the vehicle so that I could come back to fetch Dad. I managed to drive the Land Rover to close proximity of the bull, saving dad from any further walking. After a last admiring look at the magnificent animal, we headed for camp. What a wonderful day, spending it with the old man! The tusks weighed in at 73 pounds and 69 pounds. I to this day, wonder what the other bull's ivory weighed?

The next day we returned to the sites. We had sent Gutu, Tseka and a couple of hired locals to go and cut the tusks out of the first elephant bull. Dad and I supervised the removal of the tusks of the bigger bull. In those days we weren't interested in anything but ivory. We had plenty of elephant feet at home already and we didn't want the skin. We didn't have room for it anyway, as we only had the Land Rover and a trailer for transport.

We got back to camp, finally, with the four tusks and half a bag of meat each for our three workers. The rest of the carcass went to the headman and the villagers.

Our men cut up their meat to dry. Space and weight were serious factors. Already they had buffalo meat, so the elephant meat was going to be extra weight, so it needed to be as dry as possible. We decided that we would wait a couple of days before returning to the farm.

By lunchtime the following day, I was bored of just sitting around camp, waiting for the meat to dry. I decided to go for a walk up the Angwa. I wasn't planning to shoot anything, but I still had a general game license which allowed me to shoot plains game. I was going to take my 9.3 but Dad insisted that I took a heavy rifle as well, so I gave Tseka the .470 to carry.

After wandering along the river for about an hour, we bumped into three kudu bulls. I shot the biggest of the three. We donated the meat to the villagers, who by now, was very happy with our hunt!

We broke camp the next day and headed for home. It had been a wonderful trip. I had many memorable hunting trips with the old man, using the .470 he gave me for my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. None, however, were as successful as this one.

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