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*& Death on the Mopane Flats*

*and old warrior fought for life as he fought in  
the end I grew to love him. by Steve Ramirez*



t's 5:40 a.m. and I woke up with Africa in my dreams again. Africa is like that. She's like a sensuous woman that you once met and no matter how hard you try, you can't get her out of your mind. You remember her every detail. You remember her deep inviting eyes and the texture of her skin; the sound of her voice and how she smiled when you looked at her. You remember that casual, flirtatious touch that told you that she wanted you to stay just a little longer, or come back to her soon if you truly must leave her now, and how that brief moment of your touching made you wish that you did not have to leave her; and you lament the distance between you; and you curse fate for your rotten luck.

Africa is like that unforgettable woman for me. I remember how she felt. I remember how the thornbush covered her hillsides and the kudu would vanish in her deep valleys. And at this moment in the darkness of my room, I am reliving the day when an old gemsbok bull and I were joined in our spirits. I can see him lying there under the mopane tree, bleeding. Our eyes locked as I placed the crosshairs in the right spot and squeezed the trigger for the final time. At last there was relief for the both of us.

When I crossed through the thorny depression between us and up the hill to the spot in the sand where he lay on his side, I held my rifle at the ready, half expecting him to get up yet again. But not this time. After all we had been through together, it was finally over. For the first time now I really saw his horns. The right horn was thick and black, curving smoothly and naturally up and back. The left was bent to the left; a mark of the hardship he endured in life. Its tip was splintered; a mark of the fall he took when I shot him the first time.

That first shot was five kilometers and a day ago and should have ended it right there and then. But this old bull had other plans. He fought for life as he fought in life, and in the end I grew to love him more than all the perfectly straight-horned gemsbok in Namibia. That is the story of how things ended. But this is how it all began.

I had already been a wonderful safari for Alice and me. We had married in Africa some eighteen years prior, but this was the first time for her to join me on the hunt. Our safari had begun in the south of Namibia along the edge of the Kalahari just east of Keetmanshoop. There, the landscape was so wide and open that the game would spot you from a half-mile away and was already running when you saw it.

The veld was populated with kudu, golden gemsbok, hartebeest, springbok, Burchell's zebra, impala, steenbok and duiker. The only way to hunt these animals was to position yourself between the kopies so as to intercept them as they ran past, trailing fine red dust. I shot zebra, red hartebeest

and springbok, all at a full run or at a long distance, but none of them went far after the shot.

My hunt in Namibia's southern veld was an exciting challenge in a stunningly beautiful land. North of the Tropic of Capricorn I hunted kudu on foot over steep rocky kloofs and through thornbush and blackhook. We climbed and bled for days before I finally took a beautiful kudu bull as he and three others ran up a kloof some 300 yards away. I had a close-quarter encounter with an old warthog boar who fell to a quick heart shot. Gemsbok would be different though. My kudu made me work. My gemsbok made me suffer.

It was the next to last hunting day and almost sundown when we rounded the curve into a drainage. I had suffered a series of setbacks with gemsbok during this hunt, some made of circumstance, some made of personal error. I was feeling hungry for just one more chance at this animal that always seemed to be just out of range or behind heavy cover. As the sunlight began its slide behind the hills, I got that final chance.

A gemsbok bull stood on the hillside not 150 yards away. He looked at me calmly as I lined up on the center of his shoulder and squeezed off a 180-grain .300 WSM round. With the crack of the rifle came the sound of the gemsbok crashing down into the brush and rocks on the hillside. He had fallen hard and was down. Still, I wasn't certain. My professional hunter and new friend Fred Burchell and his tracker Franz both felt he was done for. I certainly hoped he was done for. I'd already come to expect the worst from gemsbok.

We ran up the hill to collect him. There was the broken tree where he fell, and there was a pool of blood, but he was



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE RAMIREZ

gone. Just then Franz saw him run onto the flats below as the sun dropped behind the hills. Fred tried to assure me that we'd find him dead in the brush first thing in the morning, but the wounded bull was all I could think of as the generator unwound and the light bulb hanging from the ceiling glowed less and less, until my room was dark and silent.

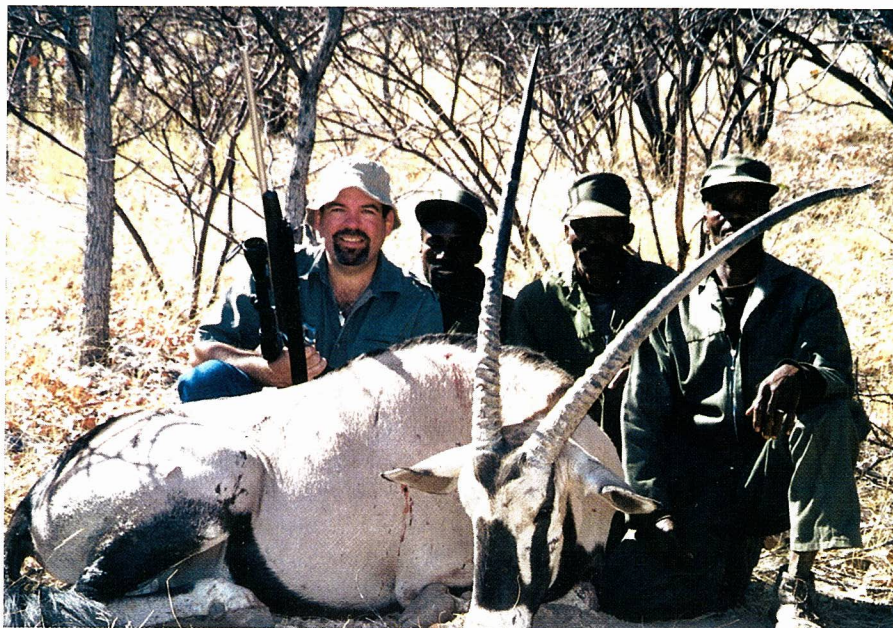
In the morning I woke up automatically before first light. While Alice slept quietly, I shaved and dressed to candlelight as the camp generator had not yet been turned on. There is a certain pleasure that comes from having to shave by candlelight and having to depend on a generator for electricity and a well-pump for water. Perhaps it's the way things should be, free of modern-day trappings that can often be obstacles to real living.

The morning air was crisp and cold as we drove to where we last saw the bull enter the mopane flats. Our trackers, Franz and the two Bushmen, Pit and Johannes, had already arrived. We found them standing at the edge of the flats, waiting anxiously to work the spoor.

Pit and Johannes are brothers who used to track terrorists across the Angolan border with the South African Defense Forces during the Bush War. Pit wears a slight smile on his face as if he is constantly enjoying some internal joke. It felt good to be around him because of his easy, happy nature. Johannes was a methodical master of the track. Franz, a Herrero, was serious, focused and a born hunter. I liked him and respected his bushcraft abilities. The few compliments he directed my way I



A day's chase and five kilometers of hiking through dense thornbush ended with this photograph of the author and his Nambian trackers with the elusive gemsbok bull.



held on to as if they were gemstones found among the scree.

In short order they picked up the spoor, and we began following a blood trail of crimson drops on grey stones. At times reading the spoor was easy. Streaks of red dripped across the rocks and his splayed right hoofprint showed how he was favoring one leg over the other. We would see that he had walked in circles like a cat before lying down to rest beneath a mopane tree.

During these first moments on the spoor I found myself very much at the ready. My mind would envision the sight of him lying dead on his side with only the grayness of his hide and a single black horn rising from the grass. Other times I would see him jumping up from his resting place, giving me scant seconds to end the chase. But my mind's eye was wrong. He would not lie down and he would not give into death. Instead, he would continue walking, even running, bleeding and then not bleeding for kilometer after kilometer through the seemingly endless mopane.

The sun had now risen high above the amber hills. The air had grown warm and the thornbush and blackhook had cut through my hands and arms.

*We are both tired and bleeding now, I thought. That's how things should be. We will suffer together.*

As the distance and the hours grew, I began to experience emotions that only a hunter could fathom. At first I loved him. I was consumed with worry over his suffering.

*Maybe I hit him badly.*

*No, I know I was right on his shoulder when I squeezed the trigger.*

*But maybe I bugged it up.*

*Maybe I hit his leg.*

*I can't give up on him. I have to end this.*

*But I may never see him in these dense mopane flats.*

*If only he'd turn toward the hills. Then maybe there would be a chance.*

And then something happened that had never happened to me before. I began to hate him. I grew angry at him for not giving up and dying, as if it were his fault that I had shot him. I pushed that aside and began to grow angry at myself.

*How could you bugged up that simple shot?*

*I couldn't. I didn't. I'm sure. Am I?*

*But why then won't he stop?*

I could see him once again in my imagination as he lay dying from the infection in his wound. I saw myself on the airplane going home to Texas through the blackened sky with a memory I did

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## Life & Death

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not want to live with.

*Please God, turn him. For his sake and mine turn him toward the hills.*

And turn he did.

**D**id the happy Bushman find his track joining with those of several other bulls and turning

toward the hills. Our spirits lifted. Fred Burchell is a product of earlier times, as tough as biltong but with a gentle heart. He knew without us speaking what I had been going through, and he let me pass through it in respectful silence.

Alice had also been by my side for every step of every kilometer. She followed Fred and me through thornbush and blackhook, across razor-sharp rocks, past leopard tracks and shedded cobra skins. We had not spoken during the many hours of the stalk, but she knew how I was feeling

about the bull and about myself. I knew she was silently praying for us both. I felt so proud of her as she walked and climbed and tugged the thorns from her clothes without complaint.

The mopane trees grew tighter around us as we drew closer to the hills. Just then Franz and Pit began pointing excitedly toward the slope in front of us. They were speaking rapidly to Fred in Xhosa and Afrikaans, but the one word that I could understand was *gemsbok!* We strained to see what the trackers so clearly saw through the black, twisted branches. All at once Fred and I focused on a lone gemsbok bull standing under a mopane maybe 300 yards away.

Since we had started out the morning expecting to simply collect the bull's body, Fred had not brought his rangefinder. For the same reason we had both brought just a handful of ammunition for our rifles. This was the only time in two weeks of hunting that Alice was not carrying the spare ammo. All of these factors would soon come into play.

*I see him. I see a bull beneath the mopane!*

*I don't think that's him.*

Franz urgently pointed to several gemsbok near the ridgetop. "There!" he said, "three bulls running together. Yours is toward the front!"

Through my scope I found two huge bulls racing through the mopane toward the crest of the hill. I had a wounded bull to stop. These old boys couldn't be my concern. Then all at once I saw him. He was running across the hillside on three legs!

*I have to stop him here and now. Soon he would be out of sight. This was most likely my last chance to end it. I can't let him die slowly from the wound I had inflicted upon him.*

Fred and I fired simultaneously. Then again, and again. I looked at my belt. I had only four rounds left and Fred was out of ammo.

*I have to settle down.*

*It's too far for off-hand shooting. Well over 400 yards.*

*Use the tree as a rest you idiot! I told myself.*

I held my crosshairs even with the tips of his horns and swung with him.

There was a second or two before he was lost forever. The recoil of my rifle and the steepness of the shot drove the scope into my eyebrow. I never felt the pain of the cut or noticed the bleeding.

"He's down!" Fred yelled. "You jolly well hit him."

We couldn't see him, so we circled around, then edged along the next hill into the wind. As I crested the hillside our eyes met. He was lying beneath a mopane tree, as if resting in the shade. His head was up and at only fifty yards we spent seconds that seemed like hours looking at each other.

I have heard it said that some Native Americans believe that the spirits speak to you through the wind. This may be true. The wind picked up and blew through us both as I squeezed the trigger. My bull rolled over and began that long sleep that awaits all of us. Fred slapped me on the back. I began moving toward him as if in a trance. I had to find out what had happened. *Where had my first shot gone?*

As we got up to the bull, I could see where the last shot had hit just behind the shoulder. It had ended our pain. The second shot had gone through his back at the spine. That shot stopped him from being lost. As Franz and Pit rolled him over, we saw the first shot—the shot I had taken the day before at only 147 yards. The "premium" bullet had entered directly in the center of the shoulder blade, then deflected at a 90-degree angle and exited directly out the front of the same shoulder, never hitting the vitals.

It was *the bullet* that had failed.

Was there a lesson to be learned after all this? Let's just say that it reminded me that in hunting, as in life, nothing is a sure bet.

I did not want to watch Franz and Pit cape the bull. I wanted to remember him as he was: a battered old warrior. I sat next to Alice on the hillside looking out at the mopane flats for the last time. I was already homesick for Africa.

Sleep well my friend. You will live on in a place of honor, at least until I join you someday, where the thornbush never cuts and the mopane is always green. *Uros*

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## Planning Your Trip

Burchell Safaris can be contacted through Cabela's Outdoor Adventures at 800-346-8747 or via e-mail: [burchell@mweb.com.na](mailto:burchell@mweb.com.na). Fred and Laura Burchell have that unique ability to make you feel like family. Fred operates a 90,000-acre ranch east of the Kalahari. From there he can arrange hunting excursions into the Kalahari. His 35,000-acre north ranch lies just south of the Etosha Pan, and is simply covered in kudu. Fred's son, Barry Burchell, operates a hunting ranch in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

Burchell Safaris can arrange for you to explore the many wonderful sights of Namibia. From the north ranch we visited the Etosha Pan; the Skeleton Coast including Cape Cross Seal Reserve, Messum Crater and the Namib-Naukluft Desert National Park. I climbed the world's tallest sand dune and explored the lichen fields and *welwitschia* forest. In the south you can hike Fish River Canyon, which is second only to our Grand Canyon. The point is, Namibia is a great adventure that goes beyond the hunt, and Fred is as good a tour guide as you can find.

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