ON SAFARI WITH AN ACADEMIC—BY CHARLES F. PRIORE, JR.
Part I Dreaming and Planning

Safari! The mere mention of the word conjures up all kinds of things in peoples’ imaginations. Perhaps it was those movies with Stewart Granger that did it to me. Perhaps it was the books of Hemingway, Ruark and Capstick. Whatever—since childhood all I ever wanted, indeed fantasized about was going on an African safari.

Then reality hit. I went to college and earned a B.A. in Biology. Then on to graduate school for a Master’s Degree in Library and Information Science. From there I accepted academic positions all across the country. I hung my hat in New York, Missouri, California and finally Minnesota, where I have resided for close to 21 years.

Along the way, actually in my first year of college, I made a friend for eternity. Sometimes in this life there are people that you take an instant liking to. Bob was just such a person. Our friendship has endured to this very day – a grand total of 35 years. Bob dropped out of college as a sophomore. He got into the construction business and is a multi-millionaire today. I, on the other hand, chose a different path—the path of academia. Little risk, modest income, and for the most part job security. No regrets, but African safaris are not a part of the equation.

All of this changed a few months ago. Bob emailed me and wrote that there had been a last minute cancellation on his July safari. He could squeeze me in at a greatly reduced rate. But the best part was, he would pick up the tab for the entire trip, except for incidentals! One catch – I’d have to film him taking a cape buffalo and a lion with a bow and arrow. I just about screamed for joy in my office, as a dream was about to become true. “Oh yeah,” he said. “You need to clear this with your wife first because this is going to be a 15 day trip. I don’t want to be held responsible for any problems in your household.”

I couldn’t wait for the end of the day. I drove home in a fog. After a cocktail with my wife of 23 years, I put the proposition to her. Within a nano second she replied: “You have to go, this is the chance of a lifetime and it will never happen again.” I love my wife very much.
A few emails later, Bob narrowed my “incidental” costs down to a passport, a rifle and some ammunition. Of course there were a few other things to purchase; like additional slacks and shirts and a sturdier gun case for the long journey. But all in all, the costs of preparation were modest.

In many ways I have a leg up on safari wannabes. The Carleton College Gould Library (thanks to me), has one of the finest collections of Africana in the entire state of Minnesota and perhaps the Midwest. I inherited the responsibility for building this collection from a colleague who retired about seven years ago. Since that time I have tracked down rare books and continue to exhaust the catalogs that publishers like Safari Press and Trophy Room Books have to offer. Also, I get to read these books the moment they arrive thanks to our notification system. As I walk down the aisles I am amazed at how many books I have read on safari life and African history. My guess is that I’ve polished off between 250–300 books in the past 21 years. (This does not include articles.) Even now, on my reading stand at home, there are about six books just waiting to be devoured.

I did find myself in a quandary though. I do not own a rifle any greater than a .30-06. The thought of buying a new rifle, say a .375 H & H on my salary was not an option. So I went to the literature and, just as important, contacted a number of people who had either gone on safari personally or had a relative/friend who had done so. I also called my dear friend R.L. “Larry” Wilson, noted firearms historian who has been on 10 journeys to Africa. He then put me in contact with Robert M. Lee, an old Africa hand now residing in Sparks, Nevada. One thing became clear. The venerable .30-06 could do the job, but two things would need to be done. One would be the purchase of high quality African game bullets. The other, and probably more important, was to place the bullet in the exact spot that the professional hunter instructed.

I have an advantage over most people. First, I live on 60 secluded wooded acres in southeastern Minnesota and have constructed my own rifle range. Second, I have been hand loading my own ammunition for over 25 years. Gunfire from my backyard is very common as I practice as much as possible. Since I don’t do product endorsements of any kind, suffice it to say I shopped...
around for a 180 grain .308 bullet and with new brass cases began the slow process of creating the “perfect” African plains game cartridge. Using a new ballistics software program, I used the computer to analyze the loads I was creating. This program also gave me trajectory and muzzle velocity at various ranges etc. After a few attempts I finally came up with what I thought was the winning ballistic/reloading combination. Off to my personal range I went, and with my 11 year-old daughter as spotter, I proceeded to place 6 bullets through the same hole. My Sako Mannlicher carbine (a left-handed bolt-action beauty) was showing me why it cost so much. Back to the basement I went and cranked out the final 138 rounds.

With all the gear purchased, luggage packed, and last minute farm chores completed I waited for that magic day of July 15. Then bad news hit me on July 12. I received a phone call from Bob, and was informed that Frikkie (our professional hunter) requested that I not bring my rifle. I was dumbfounded, disappointed, and a bit angry. “What in the hell is this?” I thought. All of this time and painstaking preparation for nothing! However, upon hearing the whole story it became clear to me that I had to make the final choice.

So dear reader, here is what is going on in South Africa. The new government is NOT gun friendly. What they currently do, besides the usual forms, is hold up hunters as they arrive at the airport in Johannesburg. Here is how it works. Just a few weeks ago a South African Air flight landed with 40 hunters, each carrying at least one firearm. The line queued up, and one, yes only one official was present to clear this crowd of hunters. Frikkie’s client was at the back of the line and, despite flawless paperwork, stood there for five, yes FIVE hours! The flight from Minneapolis to Johannesburg is a grueling 22 hours. So the question was this: bring your Sako and risk a five hour wait, or leave it at home, breeze right through customs, and use the professional hunter’s rifles. The final decision was mine. I decided to take the easy way out and asked if I could just bring my hand-loaded cartridges. Answer—NO. No rifle, no cartridges. They would be confiscated the moment I landed (fear of supplying the rebels I was told). Also, cartridges must now be stored in a separate “locked” box inside your suitcase. They cannot be stored in the same case as your rifles. Yet another added pain in the derrière, but hey, it’s their country. In the end, I decided to
leave my beautiful rifle, and the custom hand loads at home. It proved to be a smart choice.
Part II: The Trip and the Cape Buffalo Fiasco

My Delta flight left at 6 AM on July 15, 2005. As a rule, air travel for me is a necessary evil. It just makes plain sense to fly when you consider the time factors using the other modes of travel. It still doesn’t mean that I like it. The ride to the airport took one hour in the pouring rain. After parking the car and taking a taxi I found myself standing around with hundreds of other people. Clearing security was a breeze but here I will offer some simple advice. A few weeks before the trip I purchased one of those "travel vests" that seem to be available from just about everyone. This one is a rather expensive vest with many pockets and a lot of inside zippered ones as well. I put my watch, pens etc. into the vest, removed it, placed it in the plastic bin, and simply walked through the metal detector—not a problem. It was also nice to know that your passport, cash and other important documents were zippered away on the inside of your garment.

This was going to be the longest flight of my life, so here are a couple of air travel hints since things are in constant flux with the airlines today. First, get a good and durable carry-on bag. Mine ripped lengthwise on the flight from Minneapolis to Atlanta. I walked a good part of the terminal with an eviscerated bag trying to find a replacement. Seventy-four dollars later I was back in action—not a great bag—but it held up for the rest of the trip. Bring ear plugs! There will always be a little screaming child on your flight—mine had two. Purchase a neck pillow. They’re inflatable, and although sleep for me is almost impossible on an aircraft, power napping helps. This c–shaped cushion keeps your head from bending over too far and prevents a sore neck and other assorted cramping. Bring snacks—candy bars, chips, granola bars, cashews, and peanuts. Your biological clock is going to be so far off that you will have cravings while the rest of the passengers are in a coma–like trance. Lastly, I would urge the purchase of "support" hose. My niece of just 35 years died in May from a pulmonary embolism. She had made a marathon automobile drive without stopping. Her failure to walk and to move around led to a blood clot, which traveled to her lung. The coroner said she was dead in less than 60 seconds. Since my wife suffers from varicose veins (hereditary) I borrowed a pair of hers. It was a lifesaver for me, as the plane was packed, with not a single seat open. The opportunity to walk about was indeed limited.
Bob and I met in Atlanta, had a sandwich and made our way to the South African Airlines gate. The plane was an A340–600 and the flight was sold out. With that many people I knew we’d be late, and sure enough 60 minutes later we left the gate. One could write a novel just based on our flight, but let’s just say that nine hours to Sal Island in the Cape Verde Island chain was, for me, an ordeal. Despite all of the creature comforts, including your own interactive television/movie screens and great service from the flight crew (not to mention free liquor), it was still one of the most grueling rides of my life. We landed on Sal Island in the middle of the night. The terrain looked like Mars. "What goes on here?" I asked the flight attendant. "Not much, just a refueling spot, change of crew, but it has the greatest shellfish in the world." After one hour, and they will not let you leave the aircraft, we were up and away and headed for Jo–burg. I was wondering how to keep from going insane knowing that I had another nine hours ahead of me. I kept extensive notes, took power naps, nibbled on a few things, sampled more South African red wine, etc., and believe it or not the plane finally touched down.

It took a long time to de–plane, but finally we made it to the walkway and, before long, we found ourselves in another line with passports ready for the immigration officials. There were so many people and so much luggage that they had to open up two baggage belts to accommodate us. After a long search we found our luggage. Once again the barraca had left me–as the extension handle of my suitcase was torn off somewhere along the way. But hey, we were there, and this was a minor detail. The group of hunters formed a line and awaited their rifles, whereas I walked through the door to meet Frikkie. No, I had never met him before, but did once see him in a video. I knew he was big and had a beard. As I passed through the door I was met by an avalanche of people. It was a mob scene. There, with a safari shirt and beard, was a large–looking fellow.

"You must be Frikkie?" I said.

"No sorry–never heard of him–is he your PH?"

"Yes, but I’ve never seen him in the flesh. I know he is a big guy with a beard."
He chuckled, and then told me that there were a lot of PHs that fit that description. We did talk for a while as I couldn’t navigate my way across the room and decided to let the crowds thin out a bit. However, this misidentified PH did confirm the incompetence of the new government and how they handled safari clients with firearms.

"How many in the line?" He asked.

"About forty."

"How many inspectors?"

"Only one, that I could see."

"They’ll be there for hours!"

He then went on to inform me about how much money the safari trade pumps into the South African economy. The many people it employs; the business for taxidermists, trackers, skinners, etc., not to mention the airlines industry. He was puzzled as to why anyone would want to destroy this cash cow.

About 40 minutes later the crowds began to thin out, and there across this wide open space was a rather large, clean-shaven man. I walked over to him and said: "you don’t happen to be Frikkie du Toit by any chance?"

With hands the size of wheel covers he took mine and pumped it heartily. This guy was big! I put him at 270 pounds, but Bob had him closer to 300. He was not fat however, just a large-framed guy well over six feet with biceps the size of my thighs. He took fifth place in arm wrestling in all of Africa when he was in his prime, he told us a few days later. I pegged him to be about 50 years old, but he is actually only 35. We chatted it up for a while, but Bob, despite having only a bow and arrow, was stuck in this long line with everyone else. Close to an hour later, he emerged with bow case in hand. Frikkie was railing about the incompetence and corruption of the officials all the way to the parking lot.
"We have a 5 1/2 hour drive--those poor bastards will still be in line and we’ll be settling in for a meal, hot shower and a couple of Castle lagers," was Frikkie’s parting shot.

Our vehicle was a newer white Toyota Land Cruiser one-ton. This would cost about 30 grand here, but in South Africa, it cost 60,000 due to the VAT tax. It had a canvas topper with a bench and this is where Bob, who didn’t sleep well on the flight, and had a Cape buffalo to shoot the next day, lay his weary bones. On roads that were sometimes worse than those to Bastogne, we headed for the town of Hoedspruit. I kept thinking about those guys in the line, and took some sort of solace in that I had left my rifle at home, but soon that scenario passed from my memory.
It has always been a personal philosophy of mine when visiting a foreign country to read as much about it as possible and to not comment about the way they run their government, especially their domestic policies. South Africa is a huge country. Geographically speaking it is larger than California and Texas combined. It is almost entirely fenced. This is hard for us to understand, for where I live three strands of barb wire qualify as a fence—but there you own any animal that is on your property. It is up to you to decide what to do with it. Consequently, you do not want these creatures jumping the wire to your neighbor’s, as they are now his property. The fences I saw were between 10 and 12 feet tall. Many were electrified. I played a game with myself trying to find a property that wasn’t fenced, and after 10 days I gave up!

The Afrikaner is an interesting study as well, and one needs to look at their history in order to fully understand their way of life. The Cape of Good Hope was settled by the Dutch in the 17th century. In 1806 the British took possession of the colony and in
1834 ordered that slavery be abolished throughout the Empire. This precipitated the Great Trek of 1835–1837, an exodus of about 5,000 trekboers (alias Boers) across the Orange and Vaal rivers. These voortrekkers (akin to our pioneers) quarreled among themselves—but one article of faith was ironclad—there were to be no rights extended to blacks or coloreds. Next to that article of faith, they despised the English as much as our forefathers did. The ruts left by the ox carts can still be seen to this very day; much like the trail left by our covered wagons. Two voortrekker republics, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were created as a national home for the Boers. One young boy, named Paul Kruger, would become famous, and Kruger National Park is named in his honor. These are a hearty and tough people. They are a no-nonsense type with a disdain for authority. They still do not think very highly of blacks, or "coloreds," as they are called today. The Boer War of 1899–1902 is certainly one of the saddest chapters in their thick book of self-reliance, individuality and repudiation of government interference. Our PH is a direct descendent of these incredibly intrepid people.

The next morning found us refreshed but famished. A breakfast of eggs, sausages and grilled tomatoes washed down with coffee got the wind back in our sails. We were headed east for another hour to Frikkie’s cousins’ ranch. Driese, who looked 60, but was actually 42 (they age quickly there) owned 2,500 acres. He was in the process of selling off this acreage and consolidating some other property so as to concentrate more on mango farming. I liked Driese from the moment I set eyes on him. Dark hair and moustache, muscular and a nice smile, he had a large semiautomatic pistol on his right hip.

"So what kind of handgun do you carry?" I inquired.

"It’s a .45 ACP made by Para–Ordnance–a great gun."

"Is it legal to carry a gun like that?"

"The authorities don’t like it. They say that it intimidates people, but I don’t give a damn."

And he didn’t give a damn, for even when we had lunch together in a very nice restaurant, the .45 was on his hip. No one at
the restaurant, including a group of Americans, who did not acknowledge us because of our obvious hunting garb, said a word in protest.

We eventually drove out to a water hole and there we made a survey of the situation. There were about 30 Cape buffalo on the ranch and because of the drought they were concentrating on just two water holes. Driese put out about three bales of alfalfa every day in order to draw them to the better of the two spots. We spent the next few hours building a blind with wire cable and an assortment of branches both live and dead. Before long we had an incredible blind.

"The buffalo always come in from the right. So make your shooting hole here facing the bales. They will walk right in front of you and I will point out the big bull. It will be no more than a 25–yard shot," said Frikkie.

What we had was a four-sided blind with a nice shooting hole in the front, and alfalfa as bait. I haven’t bow hunted in over 12
years, and I wasn’t about to tell Frikkie how to make a blind, but I thought we should have had a shooting hole on the right and left side as well. I was going to tell him so, then thought better of the idea. We settled down and awaited the arrival of the Cape buffalo. Something that did not occur to me was that I was sitting on a bale of alfalfa. Within 30 minutes my allergies kicked in, and although I did not sneeze, my nose was running so much that I finally just let it drip to the ground. In short, it was a miserable situation for me.

Then, around 2:30, Frikkie’s head popped up from his book and he whispered "buff". Lo and behold there were about seven of them, all bulls and you guessed it—they did not come in from the right—they came from straight away and to the left of us. They went to the water and drank to their hearts content. The alfalfa must have been tempting, but no dice—something was wrong and they were not going to walk in front of the blind. After about 30 minutes
they began to walk toward us—but they passed on the left side. The big bull was a scant 20 yards away, but Bob had no opening to launch an arrow. Desperately we tried to cut even a small hole, but the herd was on the move and they were not going to give us any luxury time to cut away some branches. One bull passed very close to the blind, paused a bit, and looked directly at us. I saw Frikkie slowly reach for his .458 Winchester Magnum, but the bull apparently did not wind or see anything suspicious and he ambled off. We all cursed ourselves that we had gambled on only one killing lane. Later, when out of earshot, I confided to Bob my theory of multiple shooting holes and he too had thought as I did, but didn’t want to question or insult the credentials and experience of our PH. Needless to say, we cut a hole on the left and right sides of the blind as quietly as possible. We sat until dark, and nothing ever returned; although the warthogs and impala were having a grand time.
We were at it early again the next morning. This time I had four Allegra in me and was prepared for the long haul. Despite great conditions, nothing but warthog and guinea fowl showed up. It was about 11 AM when Frikkie said: "brunch time." Off we went to the main house where we enjoyed a picnic–style lunch. It was then that the new owner of the ranch came out to greet us. He was a retired gentleman, and obviously wealthy as he had purchased not only Drieses’ property but a property across the road.

"So who’s the chap who wants to kill a Cape buffalo with a bow and arrow?" he asked.

"That’s me," replied Bob.

"Well, I’ll say this to you—you have more b***s than brains. Good luck."

We all laughed ourselves silly and then made our way back to the blind. There we sat from about noon until dark. Just when we thought it was hopeless and that the buff would not be a trophy on this trip (we were scheduled for a lion hunt the next day), the herd came in. This time they did approach from the right and they numbered fifteen.

I was supposed to be videotaping the hunt, but it was so dark that I just stepped back and sat down on the alfalfa bale. As the herd began munching, Frikkie pointed out the finest bull in the group.

"Keep your eyes on him, Bob," whispered Frikkie. "I’m going to grab this small light, and then shine it on his side. You’ll have only a few seconds to put an arrow into the crease behind the right shoulder."

Bob came to full draw with his PSE Custom using 210 grain Steel Force broadheads. Frikkie was within inches of grasping the light when I heard the whoosh, followed by a "thwap" sound.

For reasons no one understood at the moment, Bob had fired and hit the bull. They were off in a flash, and Frikkie and I just looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Why didn’t you wait for the light?" whispered Frikkie.
"I don’t know, it looked like a good shot so I let him have it, but I think I hit him high."

Half of the herd took off for the high grass, but the remainder trotted over to the water hole.

"Ok, we leave the blind and walk to the Land Cruiser. No noise, don’t trip, and keep close to me," was Frikkie’s sage advice.

As we walked out about 30 feet, with only moonlight to guide us, there, standing off about 35 yards, stood seven or eight Cape buffalo. They just stared at us, and we put as much distance between them as we could. I have to admit, the odds were in their favor. We were three men; one with a bow, one with a video camera, and the other with a .458 bolt action rifle and eight cartridges. I thought to myself that hunting is more often than not countless hours of boredom—occasionally interrupted by brief moments of excitement or sheer terror.

We got to the vehicle, drove to the main house and informed Driese of what had happened. He hopped in his truck with a tracker and back we went to the blind. We stopped both vehicles about 80 yards forward of where the alfalfa bales were. The high beams were put on and in front of us was tall grass varying from two to six feet in height. The tracker immediately picked up the spoor and Bob found his arrow. It had penetrated 16 inches and the broadhead had come off in the process. Most likely it was still in the buffalo.

"Let’s just see if we can follow them a little bit. I don’t want to push them too hard," said Frikkie softly.

Although I was asked to join them in search of the wounded buff, I did not have a rifle and told them (with a few choice words questioning their sanity) that I’d stay with the vehicle. Off they went; Bob unarmed, Frikkie with his .458, Driese with his .416 Remington, and the tracker. About 15 minutes later Bob found himself a little too far forward and in between the two PHs. He seemed unconcerned with what could possibly happen and then it did. There was a huge commotion of branches and hooves just in front of him and Frikkie began yelling: "Bob (it sounds like Bop) run, get out of there!"
Before I could even get my hand on the door of the Land Cruiser, Bob came running out of the high grass, his hat flying off and making a bee-line for the truck. I had by now gotten the door open and slid across the front seat and in a flash he was sitting next to me!

"Do you have any idea what you are doing out there?" You could have gotten killed!"

"I can dodge a cow, nothing to it; but from the way they were yelling I thought they were right behind me," said Bob a little breathlessly.

It became obvious to me that my dear friend had not read enough about the animal he had wounded. These beasts can turn on a dime, and if they do catch you they will grind you and gore you into mincemeat. A good 15 minutes had passed and Bob was getting restless. I could see the flashlights (they call them torches) of both Frikkie and Driese slowly making their way to a stand of trees about 30 yards in front and slightly to the right of the truck.

"I’m walking to the blind and I’ll bring us back a few beers," Bob said in a soft voice.

"Are you out of your mind?! There’s 80 yards of open ground from here to the blind. If those buff break from the trees and catch you in the open they’ll pulverize you! Besides, what am I going to tell your wife—‘Oh and by the way Paula, Bob walked out for a few beers and was wiped out by a herd of ticked off Cape buff. Here’s a 35mm film canister—that’s all we could find of him.’"

Bob opened the door, and tiptoed off for his cooler of Castle lagers. I just shook my head wondering if Lady Luck was going to choose this moment to "blow on some other guy’s dice." About 10 yards into his beer run, there was another rumble in the trees, only worse than the first one, and before I could even turn my head Bob was in the front seat again.

"You know, that was probably not a good idea" he said panting.

A few moments later Frikkie, Driese and the tracker emerged from the darkness. The explanation was simple; the Cape buffalo was wounded, and there was blood, but he was still running with
his pals. As a matter of fact, they were surrounding him and propping him up, much like elephants do in order that he not fall down. They called it quits for the night—and that was fine by me.

It seemed like I had only just touched the pillow when there was a knocking at the door of my motel room. "Charlie (it actually sounds more like Cholly), time to get up and head back to Driese's. I've already awakened Bob," was Frikkie's wake-up call. We piled into the Land Cruiser and left the motel parking lot, which, like everything else there, was surrounded by a 10–foot–high wire fence with concertina at the top. By the time we arrived Driese and his tracker were already in position. "Charlie, there's a .375 in the back of my truck. You can use it for the follow-up on this wounded buffalo," said Driese. Now I didn't want to offend my host, but this .375 was as battered as the Bismarck, and it was a bolt action. I'm left handed, remember, and the words from The Ghost in the Darkness echoed through my mind. "You took an unproven weapon into battle?" said Michael Douglas to Val Kilmer.
Using a bit of diplomacy, I informed Driese that I would stay with the vehicle and use the rifle in the event they pushed the bull toward me. Also, two rifles, a tracker, plus Bob were more than enough people. Everyone was satisfied and off they went.

Hours passed and I waited patiently for their return, or the sound of gunfire. Around 11 AM, they slowly made their way back to the trucks. The bull was wounded, but he must have recovered in the night as he was still running with his chums. Remember, if you wound an animal, and blood is found, you bought that animal whether or not you find it. Driese was speaking in Afrikaans to Frikkie and, although it is a very difficult language, I got the impression they were speaking about Bob. Apparently, I discovered later, they reprimanded him a couple of times for getting too far ahead of them, thus making a charge a dicier affair than it already is. "Does he not know what kind of animal he is hunting?" was Driese’s comment to both Frikkie and me.

Things were getting desperate now. Time was running out for us, and as mentioned earlier we had a lion hunt the next morning. We all drove to a very nice restaurant and over lunch and a few Castle lagers, we "sorted it out." (Yes, they do say that there.) It was decided that we would rent a helicopter. By using a chopper we would be able to quickly find the herd and with any luck spot the wounded buffalo. Frikkie would then use his .458 and finish him off; a tough break for Bob, since this would not qualify as a true "bow kill." An hour later a four-seat chopper touched down on the ranch. We all shook hands and Frikkie, along with Driese, piled in with the pilot and copilot. Off they went and, using a grid strategy, began to search for the herd of buffalo. After about 30 minutes the buffalo were spotted. The pilot brought the chopper very close to the animals and despite four sets of eyes not a single one of the buffalo seemed wounded. Around again they made a few more passes and then with one hour of flying time exhausted, they touched down. Frikkie broke the bad news. They had found the herd all right, but our bull was fully recovered. They could not even spot a blood stain on the right side. Frikkie, who does not give up easily on anything, especially hunting, had a forlorn look on his face.
"Bob, there’s nothing else we can do. Pay the pilot, and perhaps if we see buzzards or when Driese sells the animals off next month, if we spot him we'll cull him from the herd and send the horns and cape to you. Time to move on for the lion," was his closing remark.

So there it was. We all had a sick sinking feeling in our stomachs, and Bob certainly had one in his wallet as well, as this Cape buffalo lightened him by ten thousand dollars! Slowly we climbed into the Land Cruiser, as we had another 12–hour drive ahead of us. Perhaps our luck would change with the lion.
We said our goodbyes to Driese and once again squeezed into the front seat of the Land Cruiser. We had a very long drive ahead of us. Frikkie estimated 12 hours, and since it was already 2:00 pm, it was unrealistic to make a mad dash across a mountain range in the middle of the night. The plan was simple; Frikkie would drive to the point of exhaustion and then we would pull into a motel for the night. Although Bob and I volunteered to do some of the driving, the vehicles there have the steering wheels on the right side of the vehicle, and just like England, they drive on the left (wrong) side of the road. To keep things straight in daylight is tough enough, but in pitch darkness and through mountains was quite another story. We endorsed the plan of our PH.

Within an hour we once again reached the town of Hoedspruit, gathered our gear from the hotel, and stopped for diesel. Across
the road were produce vendors, and craving citrus I crossed the highway to buy some oranges and avocados. A very young and soft-spoken black woman sold me two sacks of fruit for 22 rand. I handed her a 50-rand note. Smiling bashfully, and looking down, she told me that she didn’t know how to make change. I walked her through it and for the grand total of about three U.S. dollars walked away with two large bags of fruit.

It was getting on toward late afternoon, and soon the roads were crowded with people carrying bundles of sticks on their heads. I asked Frikkie just what was going on here and he replied that this is part of their daily life. Twice a day the blacks take off and gather wood to cook their meals, and since this was July (winter), they also go to add a few more BTUs to their huts. One fellow was quite inventive. He had taken the rear chassis of an automobile, and using the drive shaft, hooked it up to a donkey. Then he built a wooden buggy-like structure around it and piled in as much firewood as he could. When I pointed this out to Frikkie he said humorlessly: “We call that the Kalahari Ferrari!”

One of the many memories I will take back with me are the living conditions and poverty that South African blacks endure. Every day is a struggle. From finding wood, to pumping water, to earning a wage that barely covers the very necessities of life. There are no luxury items here. Many people told me later that the areas we passed were the “better” parts of South Africa.

“Want to see poverty and squalor—go to Soweto,” said Frikkie. except you’ll have to go alone—they’ll kill you if they can.”

And have no doubt about that, as Johannesburg/Soweto is one of the deadliest spots in the world. Handguns are completely banned there and locals have now taken to arming themselves with baseball bats, spears, machetes and pieces of lead pipe; and these are the honest citizens! A new firearms registration policy has just gone into effect, and to put it bluntly, it makes the Canadian disaster look tame.

Bob was exhausted and so once again he crawled into the back of the truck and stretched out on the bench. How he could sleep on those bumpy roads was beyond me, but somehow he did.
So, sitting in the front seat with my PH, we began to chat it up; if for no other reason than to just keep each other from dozing off.

As I mentioned earlier in this series Frikkie comes from a strong gene pool. Descendents of the original voortrekkers, they broke away from the rest of their countrymen a few generations ago. His grandparents were right out of a Wilbur Smith novel. Once, while his grandmother was hanging laundry, two lions crept in from the bush; probably interested in getting a small calf, but that didn’t matter to granny. She went into the house, grabbed a high powered rifle, came back out, and shot both of them. She then went back to hanging the laundry! After all, there was work to be done.

His grandfather was no slouch either. A farmer, hunter and miner, he had constant run-ins with elephants. Seems like these tuskers would just push down their fences and then go to town smashing, eating and uprooting anything and everything they could. Bureaucrats forbid him to do anything, but Frikkie remembers granddad throwing small sticks of dynamite between their legs in order to be rid of these destructive animals. Both grandparents lived well into their 80s, so there is something to be said about this bushveld lifestyle.

Frikkie, like his grandparents, has been in some tight spots as well. When in the South African military he was sent on missions to eliminate the “rabble rousers” that were infiltrating the border. He readily admitted to killing three men. The last, with a telescopic rifle. It was the third killing that haunts him. He told me how they locked eyes before he pulled the trigger. When his time was up, Frikkie left the military, never considering reenlistment. (I suggest reading Alexandra Fuller’s Scribbling the Cat for a true story of a very tortured African soldier.) Since then he has devoted himself to hunting and he has racked up quite a score for a man in his mid-30s. As of this writing, he has 100 Cape buffalo, 87 lion, a dozen or so elephant, 35 leopard, and about half a dozen rhino to his credit.

Though the lion hunt was not for another 18 hours, I just had to know if there were episodes that didn’t go quite well. Two incidents stood out in his mind. The first took place after he had led a client on foot, for hours, until they finally confronted the beast. They got into position and Frikkie whispered “take him” to the archer. After what seemed like minutes, he slowly turned his head
away from the lion, and his rifle sight, to see if the client was having any difficulty. There was no client; he had taken off in a panic.

The second instance shows just how strange things can get on a safari. Once again he took his client right in close and there stood this large lion. Again, after giving the client the go ahead nothing happened. Finally, the archer admitted that he was too scared to pull the bow, and he wanted to go home. Frikkie put down his rifle, and with his left hand over the archer’s hand, used his right hand and pulled the bow back for him! The hunter released and the lion was taken.

I had every confidence that Bob would be successful in this next encounter. He has been an avid bow hunter since the early 1970s, and has traveled all over the world. He has taken some incredible species with his bow; including moose and grizzly bear. I’ve known a lot of fine pistol, shotgun and rifle shots, and I’d put him right in there with the best of them. But when it comes to the bow—he has no equal in my book.

It was 9:00 pm, and we decided to pull off for something to eat. Wimpy, the slightly upscale equivalent of Burger King or McDonalds, was about the only restaurant open. I was yearning for salad greens, but their idea of a chef salad and mine were poles apart; iceberg lettuce was the best I could hope for. Thankfully I had a burger to stave off the hunger. Frikkie hired a local to watch the truck while we were eating, as vehicle break-ins are quite common.

We found a motel not too far from the restaurant. This was yet again quite an experience. The walls surrounding it were of solid, two-foot-thick concrete and were eight feet tall. At the top was the ubiquitous concertina wire. I felt like we were spending the night on the other side of San Quentin. Frikkie was reading my mind and then said, pointing to the walls, “That’s to keep the two-legged animals out.” The rooms were clean and had bunk beds, but this is Africa so you have to go with the flow. We both slept like the dead, and took a very early “bath” (no shower head at this place), and were in the truck by 5:00 am.
Frikkie was driving like a man possessed. There are signs on the highways that have the speed limit posted and then there is a sketch of a camera beneath. This is to warn drivers that they are being monitored for speed violations.

“Frikkie, you are driving 20 kph over the limit, aren’t you afraid of getting a ticket?”

“I have over 13,000 rand in fines, but they have never come to collect it. To hell with them!” was his reply.

As the hours ticked off, the landscape began to change. Everything now seemed burned up. The soil had no moisture left in it and had turned to sand. A four-year drought had taken its toll in the Northwest Province of South Africa. If Frikkie’s calculations were
correct, and I had no reason to doubt them, we would be pulling into the Madiakgama Safari “ranch” by about 10:00 am.

Now this safari operation is a sight to behold. By the time this article reaches print, they will have expanded their property to 40,000 acres—and remember, it is entirely fenced! What sets them apart from everyone else is that this is “bow” hunting only. Because Frikkie is a very old family friend, he is the only person allowed to bring a rifle hunter; although Bob was going for a lion with his bow. Frikkie began to explain the workings of this property.

“Jimmy and Linda own the ranch, but it is Linda who runs the ranch. She is very blunt. If she likes you, fine, but if she doesn’t, she’ll tell you to your face.”

“I’ll be as smooth and debonair as Tony Curtis,” I told him.

“Who the hell is that?”

“Never mind, everything should go just fine.”

In my many readings I had picked up somewhere that these voortrekker types more often than not will invite you to tea, especially if it is the first time you have ever visited their property. It is considered the height of rudeness to decline. I kept this almost forgotten custom in the back of my mind.

At around 9:30 am we pulled off the major highway and turned onto what can best be described as a path that was once a road but was now completely covered in sand. The nature and bend of the road is determined daily by the direction and speed of the prevailing wind. Still driving as though we had never left pavement, we made our way in. I can only portray the 20-minute ride as “bone busting and kidney crushing.” Imagine being on someone’s driveway, bouncing wildly, for 20 minutes at 40 mph and you still aren’t at the main house yet. We pulled through three locked gates before we came to the final one. There in big letters it read; “Madiakgama Safari.” On the sliding gate was another smaller sign that read; “Enter on Own Risk.”

After closing the gate behind me, we had another five-minute drive before we came to the main house. This was truly an
impressive camp. There was a home for the owners, a gorgeous lodge with a full bar and dining area, a thatched roof banquet hall and then little separate lodges for guests. They employ between 20 and 30 skinners, trackers and maintenance men, plus their families.

As we got out of the truck, a huge ostrich came strolling by, followed by a warthog. Then to my delight three dogs came running up to greet us. These canines were a bull terrier mix and the boss of the group was named “Jock” in honor of the classic book “Jock of the Bushveld” by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick.

Bob and I were marveling at the sheer magnitude of this ranch, when a door opened and out came a woman in her late 40s or early 50s. Her facial skin was cracked and worn by hard work and the African sun; but one could make no mistake: this had to be Linda.

Frikkie greeted her in Afrikaans, and they kissed; he then made the introductions. I took an immediate liking to her. As we
complimented the beauty of their estate she invited us in for tea; and of course we accepted. Like most people, Linda was curious about where we came from, if we had been to Africa before, what we did for a living, etc.

After about ten minutes her son made an appearance. Jacque is 26 years old and in my opinion is on his way to becoming an outstanding PH. His English is excellent, and he possesses the natural bearing and confidence of a hunter who has faced more than his fair share of dangerous situations. Like Driese, he carried a handgun on his right hip; a semi-automatic .40 S&W. He was an absolute joy to talk to, as we discussed our favorite authors (Ruark, Capstick) and movies (Ghost in the Darkness).

Lion hunting in South Africa is no longer what it once used to be. There is a movement there; part tree hugger, part hysteria, part bureaucracy, that just wants to see this segment of big 5 hunting
shut down. By the time this article goes to print the moratorium should be in effect.

It was going on 10:30 when Frikkie and Jacque decided to double check their rifles. For this hunt our PH carried a Brno .45–70 double. Jacque carried a bolt action Ruger in .416 Rigby. Out back they went, and pop cans were exploding in no time. Things looked good on the gun end. Bob uncased his bow and with his HellFire 125 grain broadheads, began to check his pins and loosen up a bit. I checked the DVD camera; everything was going fine so far.

With his usual diplomacy Frikkie asked to no one in particular: “So what the hell are we waiting for? Let’s get going!”

“Ah” said Linda. “Don’t you remember? Two bureaucrats from the Nature Conservation Department want to tag along to see if we are hunting these lions properly.”

She then turned to me and said: “Can you believe this Cholly, they are going to tell me how to hunt on my property. Those worthless [expletives deleted]!”

Jacque came over to me and began to explain how the scenario was going to play out. The lion was on the extreme end of the reserve in which he had been feasting on donkey bait. Every night the hired hands would go out with a truck, and dragging branches behind it, they’d “brush” the roads. This wipes away all of the signs and makes it easier for the trackers to pick up the pug marks once we get in there.

“He is very big, Charlie. When he stands, his head is even with your shoulder [I’m 5’ 11’’] and he has a beautiful mane. Do you have any trouble spotting game?”

“I’m color blind.”

“Thanks for telling me, because my last client failed to mention it. I want you to stay close behind me, like a rock.”

More precious time passed, and still no game officials. Frikkie began cursing in Afrikaans, and even I knew some of the swear words. Finally everyone agreed that it was ridiculous to lose this
kind of time on people who in the end might not even show up (they call this “Africa time”). We all piled into Linda’s old Land Cruiser and started our drive deep into the reserve.

The wildlife on the ride in was incredible. I saw gemsbok, eland, giraffe, ostrich, warthogs, impala, and hundreds of birds. After about a 20-minute drive we pulled off the road and everyone got out. Rifles were loaded, Bob checked his bow and quiver (he had seven arrows, though only five had broadheads attached) and I checked the DVD camera one more time. Both trackers were sent off to see if they could find the spoor, and were told to report back once they did. You’ve got to give those guys credit for some real guts, tracking down a lion without even so much as a knife in their belt.

During this interlude we tried to relax and loosen up a bit. They passed out cigarettes and Cokes—but I didn’t imbibe either. My throat was getting a little dry though.

“So how did you and Bob meet?” inquired Jacque.

“We met in college, in September of 1971. We will soon be friends for 34 years.”

“You are no longer friends after 34 years, you are more like brothers.”

As quietly as they had left, the two trackers soon reappeared and began jabbering in Afrikaans. The tracks were found, and we would have a nice walk in store for us. We headed out in search of the lion with the two PHs in the lead. Bob was behind Frikkie, and I was behind Jacque. Ahead of them, eyes focused intensely on the sand, were the two trackers. We probably covered close to 500 yards when the tracks now left the grass and appeared on the brushed road. The cool morning had faded away, and now it was starting to get hot. My throat was much drier and I now had wished that I’d sipped something.

“No one make a sound,” whispered Jacque. “He could be anywhere along the side of the road.”
It was easy to keep quiet, as the road, due to the drought, was literally a sand box. But then I heard it; this constant little squeak with each step we took. After about 50 steps I finally figured it out. It was the shoe of one of the trackers who now had dropped back to the rear of our party, since his work (for the moment) was completed. There was nothing to be done but continue on and hope that this annoying sound would not play a negative role in this adventure.

On we went, slowly and cautiously scanning the terrain around us. Then Jacque’s hand went up. We all froze. There under a bush and in the shade, was the lion; sleeping peacefully after having feasted on the donkey. It couldn’t have been better. He was lying on his right side, fetal position, and out like a light.

“Bob, put an arrow into the dark line behind the front paw.” whispered Frikkie.

Even with the camera on zoom I could barely make out the lion due to the shade thrown by the bush. The shot would be about 25 yards, and Bob pulled his bow (a 50% let off for those who like to know those things) though he told both PHs that he could not see the line well. He actually thought he would be hitting it in the front leg.

I put the camera on zoom and then I heard the “phhht” sound as Bob released. The arrow caught him in the throat, and he came to his feet more stunned than hurt at first. He trotted off as if in a trance behind the bush and when he passed to our right he let out a roar that can only be described as primal. You just can’t explain that sound to anyone who hasn’t been on the ground with one of these magnificent animals.

“This is going to go one of two ways,” said Jacque. “Either he hit him in the throat and cut an artery which means two hours, or he missed the vitals and this will drag on for the remainder of the day.”

I said nothing, as the lion trotted off into the bush, but secretly hoped that Bob had nailed him good.

“Let’s give him about 15 minutes before we go in.” said Jacque.
And so we waited. My throat was parched and I was very nervous, but we were in the thick of it now and there was no backing out. With the trackers now in front of us, on we went. The blood spots were getting progressively bigger. I was thankful, for it looked like Bob had sliced a major artery. The temperature was rising and I had no way to dispose of the layers of clothing I had on and was sweating profusely.

As I walked behind Jacque for about another 200 yards, I suddenly saw him stop in mid-stride and jump back. He jumped straight back and if I had been closer there would have been a collision. The lion was a mere 27 feet away and no one had seen him. His front paws were dug in and his rear end up. He was ready to pounce on the closest thing that came into his way, which was Jacque. I must be honest with the reader, there were so many swear words spoken, that even I, who once worked on the railroad, blanched. Jacque could not believe that he got that close to a wounded lion and failed to see it. The coat of the lion blended with the color of the sand, which made him almost impossible to spot. He cursed himself, and I think some deceased relatives; but he regained his composure fast and started barking orders like a drill sergeant.

“Everybody back! Slow backward steps. Do not trip! Do not fall! Everybody back!”

We had had a very close call. I did not have the camera on as we weren’t expecting anything like this and by the time I did snap it on, all I recorded was the sand, because I did not want to be the chump who tripped and provoked a charge. Once we reversed ourselves out of the “danger zone” we moved back and forth, from left to right looking for a shot. Frikkie and Jacque knew the drill and they worked in tandem like two choreographed dancers. Slowly we went, back and forth, and on the fourth attempt an opening became available. Bob fired one arrow and this one hit him in the neck; but the lion once again took off.

We were in hot pursuit now and the sun was scorching. Within about 100 yards we spotted him again. The lion kept a thick bush behind him and watched us carefully. As we closed in with Frikkie on the left, his rifle shouldered, Jacque on the right in the same position, and Bob in the middle, we waited for an opportunity to
launch another arrow. But before Bob could get an arrow set and before he could get his pin on him, (about a 40 yard shot), Frikkie began to yell.

“Bob, shoot him, shoot him!”

I figured that Frikkie had sensed a charge, and both he and Jacque, being the consummate PHs, wanted Bob to finish this with a bow, not a gun. The arrow went flying prematurely, and went wide left. Bob fixed another arrow. The lion was in the center of the “clock” and we were stepping into the 3 and then the 6 o’clock position. Those two spots were all we had, but the lion would shift as we did our dance step. This Bob Fosse routine went on four more times; each time seemed like we were in slow motion, and the lion continued screaming with anger. An opportunity showed itself and Bob fired. This one went high and got stuck in a tree.

Bob was down to one arrow (with two empty shafts in reserve), and was in a tight spot. He had to make this last shot count or they would have to shoot the lion with a gun. Luck, which I thought we had, seemed to be slipping away.

Back and forth we walked, guns at the ready, bow at the ready and camera at the ready, waiting for the perfect shot and making sure that none of us tripped on any of the scrub brush and branches. Then it happened. I looked into the lens of the camera and it said: Disk full—please replace disk. I told Bob what had happened, and since I didn’t know how to change the disk (it was not my camera) he tried to do it for me. The situation was comical. His hand was shaking so bad that he could hardly get the disk out, much less put a new one in. My hand was shaking as well, but together we somehow got the full disk out and a new one inserted.

“Okay, you’ve got a new disk. We’re ready.” said Bob.

I closed the side of the camera and a message came on: Your disk is not formatted. Do you wish to format it now? I could not believe that Bob did not format all of the discs before we went out; but that was the case. Jacque, who is more camera savvy than I, came over, and with one hand on his rifle, used the other to touch all of the buttons on the screen. (I was not wearing my reading glasses and could not navigate my way through this.) Then we
waited, as the timer clicked down 38 seconds until it formatted, with the roaring reaching fever pitch. Those were the longest 38 seconds of my life! Finally we were ready to roll, and by now Bob had an opportunity for one good shot through a pie plate hole at 40 yards.

He took the shot, and the arrow passed right through the opening. The shaft entered on the left and exited out the other side. He had double-lunged it. The lion flipped up in the air and roared one last time. It was over, he was dead. Three hours after we had started, Bob had successfully arrowed an African lion.

Although I have never been in combat, I’ve read many personal accounts that describe the aftermath of battle. There is a dreadful silence; a moment of nothing, as your body gradually comes down from the adrenaline high. Such was the case with us as we all slowly and cautiously walked toward the lion. Voices were soft, almost reverent. We were still walking as though the lion could pounce on us at any second. It took a few more minutes before we all realized that it was truly over, and that unlike the Cape buffalo, this time we were successful.

Frikkie and Jacque dragged the lion from under the bush and into the open. All three arrows had done some serious cutting. And herein is the difference between the bullet and the arrow. The former is designed to deliver incredible shock, the latter to hemorrhage. The lion would need an extreme makeover.

Bob knelt next to his most magnificent quarry. He stroked his mane and began talking out loud as to how majestic this animal was. Frikkie and Jacque were ecstatic. They had managed to hold their fire for close to three hours and make this bow kill a reality.

“Do you have any idea what was done here today, Bob?” said Jacque. “You went on foot and with a bow and arrow took this incredible animal. Only a few people in the world have done this! And you Charlie, you were like a tree behind me. You did not run or falter like so many of my clients have.”
After radioing the skinners in the truck, we continued to talk and film the ending of this adventure. Bob and I were hugging each other like long lost brothers and we kept muttering things like: “I still can’t believe this” and “Did you ever think we would ever do a thing like this?”

Jacque fired his pistol twice in the air to give the truck driver a general idea as to where we were. I was still shaking a bit and had my first cigarette in many years. As soon as the truck pulled in, the skinners threw down a cooler of beer and everyone was popping ice cold Castle Lagers. But, despite my thirst, I declined.

“There’s nothing in that cooler strong enough for me.” I said.

The lion was massive, well over 600 pounds, and it took the strength of everyone there, except the camera man who continued filming, to lift and drag him onto the bed of the truck. Once accomplished, we all rode back together, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer; some lost in thought, others consumed in conversation.
Linda was waiting for us as we pulled in. She was thrilled; a successful bow kill on a lion just as the Nature Conservation officials pulled in. Who could ask for anything more?

“Your face is white Cholly. You look as though you have seen a lion. Jacque, go get him a whisky,” was Linda’s parting shot as they began grooming the lion.

“Make it a double, on ice!” I told Jacque.

Moments later the Jack Daniels took over, and I felt incredibly refreshed. The workers hosed off the lion, and then with compressed air, blow dryers and brushes cleaned him up for the photo session that was to take place about a hundred yards away from the skinning station. I have to admit, they did an incredible “make-up” job. Leo never looked better; though I am sure he would have disagreed.

After close to 50 or 60 photos, it was time to let the skinners do their job. The two officials were in no hurry to get back to the office, however. One of them, the one who did not have to drive and...
did not have a sidearm, started hitting the beer pretty hard. We found ourselves immersed in conversation for a few hours, with no ending in sight.

“Have you ever heard of Africa time?” said the tippler. “Well this is it!” And he laughed to no one in particular.

It was time to put closure to this event, and slowly we began to pack up Frikkie’s truck and make our goodbyes. Jacque was leaving in just 45 minutes for a seven-day safari in order to assist a fellow PH a few hours away. Although our time together was short, it was certainly intense. Little did Bob or I know that we would be returning to the Madiakgama in a few days and that more adventure awaited us.

Back on the sandy roads we went—destination: Frikkie’s. There was a wood fire, a grand meal, wine and cocktails awaiting us! We all talked nonstop for the entire ride.
Part IV Eland and Kudu

The front seat of a Toyota Land Cruiser really isn’t designed to hold three grown men comfortably; especially when one of them is 300 pounds. Despite the tight fit, the conversation was so animated, and the emotions still so taut, that the one-hour ride from Madiakgama to Frikkie’s main camp passed by in a blur. After finally navigating the sandy trails of Linda’s, we made our way onto a paved highway, and for about 45 minutes it was clear sailing. Evening was approaching and the blacks were seen gathering sticks for their fires, because as mentioned previously, the nights are cool in July, and the morning’s crisp. There was 30 minutes to sunset and we felt the sudden drop in temperature mingled with the smell of wood smoke emanating from the many shacks we saw along the way. Before long, Frikkie turned off and we were now on another bumpy, rutted, dirt road where we dodged donkeys and wild horses that were just running about. Then suddenly before us there appeared some pathetic-looking shacks.

“Well, here we are.” said Frikkie. “This is where you will be staying and the bathroom is way out that way; see that little outhouse?”

Bob and I were stunned. We had just gotten conned! These huts were as bad as the ones we’d been driving past for the last couple of days. The pictures on the website had shown these beautiful little huts and private bathrooms. Neither of us said much other than a soft “OK.” About 30 seconds went by when Frikkie suddenly exploded in laughter.

“That’s where my blacks live, you guys! Your accommodations are over here, way in the back.”

And sure enough about 150 yards further was a virtual oasis situated in the middle of nowhere. I was relieved to see that everything was as it was advertised to be. There was a main house for Frikkie and his family. There were four individual huts, a lounge/bar area, and a dining hall. It was going to be a very comfortable stay. Bob and I were down to our last items of clean clothing, and I was already wearing the same pair of socks twice. So finally having a home base was going to be a real pleasure. As we pulled into the driveway I could already detect the smoke coming from the cooking area, and I was famished. A door opened on the
main house and out stepped Natasha, Frikkie`s wife of five years. A former model, tall and blonde, she was, in short, stunning. Then came this screaming little boy, Frikkie Jr., yelling “Poppa! Poppa!” There was one more little addition to this family: six-month old Xanthe (pronounced shon-tay), a gorgeous little girl with blue eyes, who’s going to break a few hearts down the road. Natasha kissed her husband (Frikkie had been away for eight days) and then shook our hands. Absolutely charming, she informed us that a special meal was being prepared and that she hoped we were hungry.

“The bar is open—help yourselves. [Liquor is included in your daily rate.] Get your laundry sorted for tomorrow’s pickup. Just go in and relax a bit,” Natasha said to us.

We needed little encouragement as Bob and I grabbed our gear and walked to the huts. Upon opening the door to what was going to be home for about 10 days, the first thing I saw was this double bed, neatly made, with a mosquito net draped over it. To the rear was a small doorway that led to a toilet, shower and sink. The roof was thatched and this was going to force me to take up to four allergy pills a day—but no matter, this was part of the hunt. After a hot shower, and getting into my last set of clean clothes, I padded my way to the bar.

One thing about South Africa that struck us early on is the lack of taxes on spirits, wine and beer. Jack Daniels, which in Minnesota goes for a ridiculous $21 a bottle, was a scant $8 in the Northwest Province of South Africa. And Martel cognac, which cost upwards of $30 a bottle here, was $7 there. Even Castle Lager came in at a very reasonable $8 per case! South African wines are also quite a bargain, generally starting at $3 for a 750 ml bottle.

After pouring myself a stiff sour mash, the aroma of a wood fire took over. Frikkie came out with these gorgeous racks of lamb. To my mind, grilled lamb is about the best it gets. He then took an old plow disc that he had welded small legs onto, and put it up in the hearth next to the grill racks. Then he poured a gallon of sunflower oil into the disc and built a wood fire beneath it.

“Frikkie fries.” he said. “My specialty, in the middle of nowhere.”
The corks were popping and the smells were to die for. Before long the three of us sat down to a rack of lamb and French fries that would have been the envy of Jacques Pepin. There are moments in one’s life when you think to yourself: “it just can’t get any better than this,” and for certain, this was one of them. After the plates were cleared and the cognac poured, I brought out a box of Monte Cristo Afrique Jambo cigars. We all eased back in our chairs and for the umpteenth time we retold the lion adventure. With a cloud of delicious smoke, and our senses mellowed by the cognac, Natasha entered the dining hall and presented Bob with a certificate, which had a photo of Bob and his lion accompanied by the date and time of the kill. He was very moved and I think it was at that moment that the entire day finally took hold of all three of us.

We both felt that, with a young wife, and two small children, Frikkie should not feel obligated to stay up with us any longer than necessary. Bob and I both have children, and we know the pressures of two small ones on a marriage. So we said this to him.
“Be with your family,” I told him. “Bob and I will have plenty to talk about.”

Frikkie was very appreciative; after all, he hadn’t seen his wife and children in over a week, and they live in a very remote area. He said his “good nights” and off he went.

Bob and I settled back down into our chairs. After 34 years of friendship, that night was probably the most meaningful one we have ever shared. In our past, we both survived a car accident together, many broken romances, the passing of Bob’s younger brother, and the loss of his father. We are both second generation Italian, and we marveled at what our grandfathers would have said or thought about our feline adventure. (Probably that we were pazzesco—crazy!) The hours slipped by and the conversation went from one topic to another: from events of a few years ago to others decades past. But eventually, it still came back to the lion and that we had both shared this unforgettable exploit.
It was getting late, and chilly. The wood fire was slowly burning down and we had another adventure in the morning; eland. We both walked toward our hut and we said our good nights. I piled all of my dirty laundry on the floor, as it is done daily when on safari. (Here is a tip that you should remember from your summer camp days as a child: get a laundry marker and initial every shirt, pair of slacks, underwear and sock. We both had the same clothing, but my laundry marks saved the day.) Before I finally fell asleep that night, I actually thought to myself; if I don’t wake up, it will be okay, because I have set out and done all that I have ever wanted to do in this life. No regrets. This maudlin thought did not last for long.

Frikkie was pounding on the door early the next morning. Bob and I awoke to a hot cup of instant coffee, something that I will never get used to. Today was my day—eland. Years of dreaming were about to become reality. Frikkie brought out the rifle I would be using, and sure enough, Steve Fjestad of Blue Book Publications had guessed correctly when I phoned him with the cryptic description, just a few days prior to my departure. All that I knew was that it was of Finnish design, an over-under, and in 30-06.

“It’s a Valmet 412,” Steve said. “Interchangeable barrels, not popular in America, but very popular in Europe. It has a thumb safety. Not high end, but not low end either. It should serve you fine.”

Frikkie, Bob and I got into a battered 1978 Land Cruiser and drove out, far away from the main house. One interesting aspect on South African vehicles is that PHs, much like myself, have a hard time parting with a vehicle that is still running, regardless of looks. Frikkie told us that many safari companies hold on to these old relics for a variety of reasons. They are reliable, can take punishment, and if the vehicle was owned and operated in the interior, pretty much free of rust. Then, there is that VAT tax which is almost 100% of the sticker price! No one in their right mind would buy a car or truck from the coast, as the sea salt literally eats them up. We were to see many old vehicles during our stay, including quite a number at Madiakgama.
“Ok,” said Frikkie. “Let’s see what you can do. Hit that tin circle.”

Since everything is fenced in South Africa, landowners attach these cut-out metal circles, taken from the bottoms of barrels and buckets, onto the barbed wire. As the wind blows, these circles rattle and the sound scares off the animals that like to linger along the fence line, eventually drawing them back to the interior.

“Shoot for the center of that round plate.” said Frikkie.

We were about 100 yards away and since the windshield had been locked down I rested the rifle on the dashboard. The rifle kicked and before I knew it there was a hole—dead center. “Shoot again,” said Frikkie. So I shot one more time. I could sense that I pulled the shot a bit and the bullet went about one inch high of the first shot.

“You are dead on; you’ll be fine. You also hit a line of fence and cut it. I’ll get Alfred and Esak to fix it,” murmured our PH.
“I hope we are not going to shoot an animal from a vehicle,” I told Frikkie.

“This is South Africa so [expletive] get used to it, because that is the way it is done here!”

Now I do not approve of such a thing. Driving after an animal and shooting from a car is not my idea of hunting or fair chase. I had told Bob beforehand that I was not happy with this approach to my first African safari, but he said that he had talked to Frikkie and there was no alternative. What could I do? Thousands of miles from home and faced with a situation that I would never even consider in the States, I decided to play it out and see how things would unfold.

We drove around for about an hour, running over bushes and shrubs, and in some cases just pushing over small trees. We saw everything but eland. Now the eland (Tauratragus derbianus) is the largest antelope in the world. When full grown they can stand six feet at the shoulders and weigh almost a ton. “Shouldn’t be too hard to find,” I thought to myself. After about an hour of driving and glassing, we finally spotted a small herd.

“There’s one large bull in there.” said Frikkie. “When you shoot, put the bullet in the crease behind the shoulder.”

On and on we drove, running over more bushes and small trees with the old Land Cruiser. The morning was quite cool for late July, and I had on every stitch of long-sleeve clothing that I had brought. Finally we saw the herd, about five animals total, at a distance of 150 yards.

“Take the one on the far left.” said Frikkie. “He is the bull and a beauty. Shoot by laying the rifle across the dash and fire in front of me. I’ll just lean back.”

All the dreams and pressures of hunting in Africa poured into my mind. Everything I had ever studied now rested on this first shot; my first African shot. Would I miss? Would I wound him, and never recover the animal? Would I shoot the wrong one? I was as nervous as a 16-year-old on a blind date.
The bull was standing broadside and it was an easy shot. I snapped the rifle to my shoulder, clicked off the safety and when I looked through the scope I saw black. Yes, total and complete blackness. The rifle had been set up for Frikkie and I am much smaller than he is. I had “parallaxed” my sight picture. I tried to get the focus corrected by sliding my head forward and back, but it was no use. I couldn’t find the right spot and before I knew it, the eland had run off. Frikkie was not happy, but he didn’t say anything when I told him what had happened.

We drove for another two hours and finally we found the herd again. The old bull was still with them, and this time the shot was about the same distance; 150 yards. Frikkie said, “Take him.”

I put the rifle on the dash and the scope was as clear as day. I placed the crosshairs on the crease behind the right shoulder and squeezed. All of us heard (except me) the bullet hit the mark. I knew I had made a perfect shot on this eland. But before I could congratulate myself, Frikkie was screaming, “Shoot, shoot, shoot the bastard again!”

I could not understand the hysterics, but I haven’t been yelled at in a long time either, so I let another shot go despite the fact that it wasn’t necessary. The second shot was high and hit it in the back, and did nothing. The great eland stammered about 30 yards and then flopped over. He was stone cold dead by the time we got there. My first shot had been right on the money; through the right lung, heart, and then the left lung. The bullet had exited the left side. The cartridges, made in Serbia of all places, performed well, despite my initial misgivings.

I had done it. My first kill in Africa and technically with one shot! All the years of practice and reading had paid off. We approached the eland cautiously. It was a massive animal, coming in at 1,500 pounds. Nothing to fear, though—it was gone. The body was covered with about a dozen or so parasitic flies, still clinging on, despite the fact that their host was now defunct.

Frikkie used the two-way radio and called Esak, his tracker. Esak drove out the newer Land Cruiser and they began to load the carcass after Bob and I took many photos.
Pulling an animal that weighs close to one ton is no easy feat, especially given our location. Esak arrived, then jumped in the 1978 Land Cruiser and backed it up right to the eland, leaving two distinct tire tracks in the sand. Then he pulled away. Then he grabbed a shovel and began digging trenches to a depth of about six inches. Bob and I, no slouches to manual labor, couldn’t even fathom what the heck he was doing. And, since he didn’t speak English and we didn’t speak Afrikaans, we were forced to watch helplessly. After the two trenches were dug, he backed the old Land Cruiser right up to the eland, letting the rear wheels sink deep into the two depressions. Now the bed of the truck was level with the ground. Frikkie brought the newer truck and pulled it up to the old one, so they were facing grill to grill. He then tied a stout rope to the rear leg of the eland, ran it through the bed of the old truck, over the windshield and then tied it to the front bumper of the newer Toyota. Frikkie reversed his truck and slowly pulled the
animal onto the bed of his `78 Land Cruiser. After it was safely aboard, Esak got in the driver’s seat and with the four-wheel drive engaged just drove away.


It was over. I had taken my first African animal. I was thrilled and yet I was lugubrious. The sad part wasn’t thinking about the fact that I had traveled halfway around the world to drop this beautiful antelope. The part that bothered me was that so many of the people whom I loved, and would have loved to know that I had done such a thing, were no longer on this earth. Isn’t it ironic that when you finally make some great personal accomplishment, the people that would understand and appreciate it the most aren’t there? Such was the case with me.

We drove back to the main house and by the time we got there the skinning process was almost underway. Frikkie’s
operation is a crude but effective one. After the rope is tied to the rear leg of the animal, the long part of the rope is thrown over a tree branch by either Esak or Alfred. The rope is attached to the front of the Land Cruiser which pulls the animal up the branch. When it is finally in position the skinning/gutting process begins. These skinners are pure artisans. Using a box–cutter–type knife, they begin to trim the skin from the legs. Then, using more sophisticated blades they begin to take the animal hide down. They are perfectionists and are told beforehand whether it is to be a full or shoulder mount. This determines the way in which the skinning process is accomplished.

“Time for a few Castle Lagers,” said Frikkie.

So off we went back to the main house and then we had a light lunch. We would rest up for a few hours and then head off for a ground blind and Bob’s chance to shoot an eland with his bow.

After about two hours of R&R we hopped into the old truck and headed out for one of Frikkie’s ground blinds. This particular blind was a straw hut that when you entered from the rear, and it put you about four feet below ground level. The shooting hole was about the size of a dinner plate and was the only opening we had. About 20 yards out was a circular pool of water. Frikkie had dropped off some corn on the cob and alfalfa, and here we sat in this dugout for a couple of hours. Hundreds of birds came in, their wings creating a sound like howling wind. As for eland, nada.

It was almost 6:00 and getting dark. We were just about ready to call it quits when we heard snorting sounds.

“Eland!” whispered Frikkie.
Bob put his very long novel on the ground. He stood slowly, and cautiously peered through the little hole. There, about 25 yards out, but staring directly into the blind, was a very large eland. His horns were not as symmetrical as the ones on my eland, but bow hunting is a sport of limited opportunity, and sometimes you have to take what comes in. Frikkie told Bob to take him, and so he pulled back. Resting his pin on this enormous animal, he let go from his mechanical release. The arrow hit midway and high on the eland. It had pierced the lung, but the eland didn’t know that. He took off like a shot and was gone. It was really getting dark now and Frikkie gave us some sage advice.

“A gun wound is one thing, but an arrow another. If we go after him now, we could end up tracking him for the rest of the night. Better to let him run out and lay down. We will get him in the early morning.”

Neither Bob nor I were going to argue with advice like that, so we packed up our gear and headed back for the main camp. We were both exhausted. Jet lag and the pre-dawn wake-up calls,
coupled with the early morning chill and hours of bouncing in an old truck,

A view of the eland through the hole in the blind.

were starting to take a toll. As we pulled into camp we could feel a wall of warm air greet us as the wood fires had been started and we were being treated to yet another five-star African meal.

Tonight was eland steaks. Esak had cut out the best parts and brought them for Natasha to marinate. Eating eland is like eating the best rib-eye/delmonico money can buy. With cocktails, wine, a salad, and a few other goodies it was almost as good as the lamb we had had the night before; although I think Bob would have disagreed with me.

We let Frikkie get to his family while Bob and I talked on for hours and hours. What a day! I had finally connected with my first African animal. I wasn’t sure how I was going to fall asleep with all of this excitement, but before I knew it, I was talking with the sand man.

Our “huts,” which lacked any kind of heat, were made of solid stone with a thatched roof. When I awakened I was startled by how
cool it was, especially when my bare feet touched the floor. Talk about a wake-up call. After a hot shower (the water heaters are on the outside of the hut) and a fresh set of clothes (which Lillian, Esak’s wife, had laundered/ironed to near perfection), I ambled out to the main hut for breakfast. Now I don’t know if this is just Frikkie`s way of doing things, or if this is a Boer tradition, but we never once had a trencherman’s breakfast. We would sip scalding hot instant coffee (which I disliked so much that I eventually switched to tea) and these really hard biscuits, which my dog might have broken a tooth on. By around 11:00 we would have a “brunch” which was quite substantial, but my stomach rumbled and growled the entire morning.

With coffee and biscuits in us, we packed up the old Land Cruiser and headed out into the bush in search of Bob’s eland. Unknown to us, Esak had left camp, on foot, in the pre-dawn hours and had begun tracking. As we drove down the road he waved at us. He had already found the eland, about 500 yards from the water
hole, and was holding Bob’s arrow. Esak hopped in the truck and we drove on a bit until the eland came into view. The arrow had done some internal damage, puncturing one lung, but Frikkie was correct: this thing would have run for miles had we pursued it.

Africa is a land with a fragile balance between life and death. As we pulled the eland out from under a bush we noticed that the rear end had already been eaten away.


Fortunately they did not do as much damage as they could have, and there was still going to be plenty of meat for the freezer and for the blacks. Remember, you are not allowed to bring any meat back into the United States. For Frikkie, this was a carnivore’s bonanza. Two eland with a combined weight of 3,000 pounds meant a lot of biltong (South African version of our jerky), steaks, roasts, sausages etc. Literally nothing goes to waste in Africa; they
have discovered a purpose for everything. Even the organs are prepared, as we were to eat liver and heart one night.

Again, Esak backed the old Toyota up to the fallen eland. Then he pulled forward, and started digging trenches for the tires to make the bed level with the ground. Frikkie called Natasha on the two-way radio and she brought out the newer Land Cruiser. Once in position, we tied the rope onto the eland, fed it through the back of the truck, over the windshield and tied it off on the front bumper of Frikkie`s truck. Slow but sure, he put it in reverse and the eland was heaved onto the truck bed. We closed the tailgate, Esak hopped in, and in four-wheel drive, slowly put it into gear and came out of the trenches. Back to camp we went, where we hauled the animal onto the gutting/skinning tree. Esak and Alfred went to work and I photographed a good part of this. Both of these men were like expert surgeons. The skin came off perfectly, and the organs dropped out. The animal was cut into large chunks and then put on
meat hooks to cool down in the locker. The whole process took about an hour.

Brunch was ready, and the three of us were very hungry. We had sausages, eggs, toast, more instant coffee, and a pitcher of mango juice. I just knew no matter how careful I was, there was going to be an increase in my waistline. You can’t eat like this and not gain a few pounds.

“Rest up a bit, and then let’s get Charlie a kudu,” said Frikkie.

We sat in the comfortable lawn chairs while Lillian cleared the dishes and Frikkie checked on some minor details. Bob and I both felt like King Farouk; life out here was good, damn good! We did not get the buffalo, but we did nail a lion, dropped two eland, and had eight days left to our safari.

“Bop, [that’s how Frikkie pronounced ‘Bob’] Cholly, I’ve got a problem.” said Frikkie. “The water heater is dead on the main house and the compressor went out on the big meat freezer. I have to drive to Tosca and put the meat in a friend’s freezer and then get the parts for the water heater. Sorry, but the kudu will have to wait.”

Just before I left Minnesota I had read a magazine article about how things can go wrong on a safari. Well here it was. Frikkie gave us the option of sitting in lounge chairs and basking in the warm weather, sipping Castle Lagers and smoking fine cigars, or taking a one-hour drive with him and Esak over bumpy, miserable, rutted roads to Tosca. Bob and I looked at each other for about two seconds, and then we both said simultaneously: “Let’s go to Tosca!”

Alfred and Esak carried the huge quarters of eland out of the freezer and placed them on the bed of the truck that had a clean tarpaulin spread out. We covered the meat up and the five of us drove to town.

This is going to sound hard to believe but the village of Tosca is “privately” owned. One entrepreneur owns the grocery store, liquor store, butcher shop, and gas station. The only thing he doesn’t own is the post office, but he’s probably working on that one. There is nothing else there but houses, huts and hovels. We drove up to the butcher shop where about four natives awaited us.
Together with Esak, they carried the meat into a very large freezer and began hanging it. Bob and I thought of pitching in but Frikkie informed us that it was unthinkable for two white guys to perform such a task.

Once this was finished we headed into the town of Tosca proper, which wasn’t much of a drive. We were going to go to the liquor store to re-supply, but liquor stores close, even privately owned ones, from 1:00 to 2:00 PM. Bizarre—but this is Africa. With typical nonchalance Frikkie shrugged and headed to the post office. Once every few weeks he travels to Tosca to get his mail. In three weeks` time there were only a few letters and some junk mail. Off to the hardware store we went to find parts for the water heater.

It was the strangest store I ever saw. Have you ever been in a small mom—and—pop hardware store that also sells milk, butter, eggs and other food condiments? Frikkie found the element for the water heater and out we went. As we exited the store, there on the fence was a small sign advertising one of the many private security companies in South Africa—only this one had the promise of “armed response.”

We had one more stop to make: the gas/petrol station. As we drove up there was a small group of blacks milling about with no particular purpose. But when they saw Esak, they all came to life. Of course I could not understand a word of the conversation, but Frikkie informed us that his famous tracker was sort of a celebrity in this part of the country. Esak has a wife, child, and a place to live. Most important of all, a job! These poor fellows had nothing, just part-time work when they could find it, otherwise a rather catch—as—catch—can existence. Esak was the living version of Horatio Alger. Here is a man making a paltry $150 a month, and yet he is accorded the status of “success story.”
Bob and I had lost close to a full day of hunting, but I think it was worth the experience of going into this small village and getting to see a sliver of life, South African style. We had another long and bumpy drive back, but I think both of us were mulling over the fragile balance of life, and how mere chance can determine what part of the world you are born in. We were both grateful that our grandfathers had seen the hopelessness of southern Italy and made their way to America.

We finally returned to camp. The element replacement on the water heater took about one hour and both Bob and I assisted in its repair. The compressor for the freezer was another matter, and the part would still not arrive by the time we departed.

We had cocktails, and prepared ourselves for dinner. The meal was terrific, consisting of sausages, potatoes, tomatoes and corn. They do feed you well on these safaris.
Nothing brings old friends together more than a campfire, spirits (the liquid kind) and fine cigars. We had all three on this night. Although we did not hunt that day, it really didn’t matter. We had a lot more to dwell on and there was plenty of time left. Besides, Frikkie was happy to know that he had two Yanks who were willing to pitch in when he had a problem and not let a missed day ruin the spirit of the hunt. We could have been the “ugly Americans” here, and asked for a one-day refund, but that just wasn’t our style. After our plates were cleared, we bade Frikkie good night. Bob and I settled back for another fine night of talking and smoking and reminiscing.

Out of nowhere came three feral cats to see what they could scavenge off of our plates. Not only am I allergic to cats, but for the most part I generally despise them. It became a nightly contest for the two of us to locate little Frikkie’s BB gun and start blasting these creatures as they came into the dining hall. We never hurt one, and we never got them to stay away, as hunger is a pretty motivating force. But we scared the dickens out of them. We managed to scrape our plates into a waste can and left the lid off, so that even if Lillian did a mediocre job of dishwashing, we could be reasonably assured that the cats did not eat off our place settings.

We were tired, but had another night cap and decided to chalk up this day. As we left the dining area Bob looked up into the clear African sky and just stared.

“Look at those stars! Have you ever seen a thing like this before?”

Sure enough, in all of my travels, never have I seen so many stars and constellations. We pulled our lawn chairs from out of the dining hall and leaned back gazing at the wonder of our universe.

The day was over but it was still glorious. I slept peacefully until 6:00 AM, which was helped by the fact that I had had the presence of mind to drape a heavy wool comforter over myself. This new day was going to bring us after kudu and I couldn’t wait.
In my humble opinion one of the most beautiful of all the antelope is the kudu (Tragelaphus strepsiceros). This animal has horns that are shaped like corkscrews and they can grow to five feet or more! Unlike deer, these animals do not shed their horns, and both male and female are hunted. Anything over 50 inches is considered excellent. But in this part of the country, Frikkie informed us that it would take close to a week to find one of that trophy quality. They are great runners and it is their speed that protects them from the vicious predators of the veldt. However, they do have one pronounced flaw when being hunted by man. The tops of their horns glisten in the sun, almost like a reflection. Even in the thickest of bushes and tree cover, the tops of those gorgeous horns just shine.

I got into the front seat with the Valmet, and Frikkie got behind the wheel of the old truck. Bob sat up on a bench with Esak and a pair of binoculars. Between the two, they kept a sharp lookout for kudu. On we drove, crushing old logs, smashing ant hills,
running over bushes and pushing down trees that lacked resilience owing to the drought.

“Over there!” Bob exclaimed.

And sure enough, there stood a pair of kudu. Frikkie was on them in no time. With his Nikon binoculars he gave me the verdict.

“The one on the left is the better of the two bulls. Take him!”

The problem was I couldn’t see a thing from where I was sitting. Bob was elevated, and Frikkie can spot a horse-fly at a thousand yards. But my inability to see colors was haunting me on this day as it had on so many other days in the past. By the time I stood up for a better view the kudu had booked. Left handed and color blind, I dared not look up to the heavens and utter “What next?”

But our PH was a patient man, so off he drove into the bush in pursuit. About 300 yards away I saw the pair again. They were running at a good clip.

“They’ll clear that opening Cholly, shoot fast.” Frikkie told me.

Well he was right about one thing, they were moving and they were moving fast. I had the rifle up and had a clear sight picture, when whooosh—they both darted across so quickly that it was just a blur. I looked at Frikkie and he shrugged. He knew that it was an impossible shot and let it go at that.

On we drove and it appeared that the kudu had made good their escape. Just when I thought enough was enough, the three of us spotted the pair and even I noticed the shiny tips. The larger of the two pranced around, moving from my right across to the left. There would be a good chance for a clear shot, at about 175 yards. I got ready, picked my position and let the bull walk into it. I put the crosshairs on the crease behind the left shoulder. When I fired, three of us heard the thwack sound that a bullet makes; but I didn’t. Frikkie was already screaming at me again; “Shoot! Shoot! Use the other barrel on him!”
Now it is my opinion that in America we hunters have this “thing” about one-shot kills. We are also hung up on distance. There is nothing quite so smug as telling your pals that you made this fantastic single shot on a running animal that was 300 yards away. I plead “Nolo contendere” to this phenomenon. I am, however, unlike so many of Frikkie’s clients, a pretty accomplished shot. Each time I pulled the trigger on the eland and the kudu, I knew exactly where that bullet was going. I was not going to let Frikkie’s yelling interfere with my marksmanship.

I brought the rifle down and said matter of factly that the kudu was morte. We just had to walk out there and get him. We drove out a bit and Frikkie cut the engine. Esak, tracker extraordinaire, hopped down from the bench and was off in a flash. In just about three minutes he had picked up the spoor and sure enough there was one very dead kudu. The bullet had entered the left lung, and exited the right lung. It was a very nice kudu with graceful twists, but as Frikkie had predicted only about 46 inches. I was hoping for the moniker of Charlie “The One-Shot” Bwana; but there were four more animals on my list and I did not want to get cocky.

Bob, me, Esak, and the kudu.
The kudu was not nearly as heavy as the eland. We put this one in the 400–450 pound range. After some photographs were taken, the four of us, with some grunting and groaning, got the kudu onto the bed of the truck. Once secured, we rode back with Frikkie. All in all a very nice hunt, but I was still uncomfortable with the fact that we were shooting from a vehicle. However, this was going to change, though we didn’t know it yet.
Part V Blesbok and Gemsbok

“So you don’t like shooting from the Land Cruiser, eh? Well here’s your [expletive] chance to get a little exercise! Grab the rifle and let’s bust a blesbok.”

And so with Frikkie’s version of a Jack La Lane workout, the chilly morning of Sunday, July 24, 2005 began. This was going to be a little different than our previous hunts, because this time we had Esak, our tracker, right from the beginning. We’d also be going in on foot. With a primitive shooting stick, the four of us exited the rickety Toyota and began our stalk of Damaliscus dorcas phillipsi.

I’ve got to admit that of the six animals I had licensed for, I knew the least about the blesbok. But, since I figured this was to be the one and only safari of my life, I wanted to bring home trophies that had distinctive horns. Animals like the zebra held no interest for me.

The blesbok derives its name from the Afrikaans word for blaze (bles), which refers to a very prominent white patch on the forehead. This patch is divided in two by a brown band just above the eyes. The legs, belly and rump are lighter in color than the rest of the body. Blesbok are tough characters. The males get to be about 155 pounds and average about 37 inches at the shoulder. They are territorial, and have a social structure with two distinct kinds of herds. One is the bachelor herd. The second is the breeding herd that comprises a dominant male with his females. This indefatigable, agile antelope of the grasslands is particularly jealous in matters regarding his harem. If challenged he will perform an impressive ritual of threatening behavior to warn off any rivals. Taken from the script of a Sergio Leone spaghetti western, the blesbok stares down his opponent by standing very still, with its head held high. It then proceeds to issue a salvo of snorts, lowers its head, and then leaps into the air clashing horns with its adversary. The dominant male marks his territory by making dung heaps and also by rubbing its face, which contains scent glands, against blades of grass. Expectant mothers stay with the herd and give birth to single calves in early summer. These animals are quite resilient, and calves are able to stand, and to run with their mothers, within 30 minutes of birth!
But we were the ones running now. Esak had spotted a herd of about 30, but they weren’t hanging around to see if we were trouble; I think they already knew it. The morning air had a snap to it, and I wished that I had brought more long-sleeve shirts, but there was little I could do about it. Esak, on the other hand, was dressed for arctic conditions. He was wearing a cap, heavy winter coat, gloves, coveralls and thick warm boots. Despite the garb, he was gliding across the dried ground and not making a sound. Because of his Spartan lifestyle, he wasn’t breathing hard either. Bob, Frikkie and I were forced to trot, bent over, so as to keep us behind the shrubberies, at the same time hoping to close the distance without being spotted a second time. We paused to get a better idea of a possible trophy. The three of us were breathing hard; each of us thinking silently to ourselves of the many gastronomic/liquid sins we had committed, and how in our youth we could have easily done this with a hangover.

“At least I gave up cigarettes,” I thought to myself.

Frikkie had spotted a really nice male. It was not going to be easy, though. They were moving very quickly.

“Okay, I know exactly what they are going to do. They’re making for that hill and once they cross it, we’ll never get them. Let’s run for that knoll—you’ll get one chance,” Frikkie said a little breathlessly.

So off we went; running at a good clip this time, dodging branches, jumping over ant hills, and pausing for a few seconds to pull one of those “wait a bit thorns” from my safari jacket. We finally made it to some high ground, and way below, trotting in single file, but on the other side of a very long hedgerow, was our quarry.

“Cholly, this is what you do,” said Frikkie. “There is a break in the bushes, a gap of about four feet. When you see an all-white blesbok, get ready, because the next one is a gorgeous male. Drop him.”

My heart was pounding and I was taking very deep breaths to get myself under control. This would be the longest shot so far on this safari; 250 yards at a trotting animal. The reader may question how I solved the “parallax” issue that almost cost me an eland and the answer is quite simple. At every opportunity I would snap the
Valmet to my shoulder and look through the scope. I must have done this dozens of times until I finally figured out just where I had to keep my distance from the tube. It wasn’t comfortable by any stretch, but it was working.

Frikkie handed me his shooting stick. It was the non-adjustable kind and when I put the rifle in the “V” it was so high that I thought I was going to be taking a shot at a flying crow.

“This is a piece of crap, Frikkie.”

“Yes I have heard that from a number of my clients, but that’s all I’ve got. Hurry, shoot him!”

There was no way on God’s green earth that I was going to hit a moving blesbok at 250 yards free hand. I let the stick drop to the ground and crawled over to a scrawny, but sturdy, tree. For the first time on this hunt being left handed was in my favor. I leaned into the “V” of the tree with my right shoulder, and used my right hand to not only hold the forearm of the rifle, but with my thumb, hook a small branch.

Although I wasn’t panting as hard as before, I still had breathing issues to contend with, as well as Frikkie’s constant harping about shooting and shooting fast. I snuggled the rifle into my left shoulder and had no trouble with the sight picture. Holding on the gap in the bushes, I watched them pass by at a pretty decent gallop. Frikkie was whispering about how many more would be coming by before I’d see the snow white one.

“Three more to go, then the white one. As soon as it clears get ready,” he said under his breath.

“This is going to be one hell of a shot cugino (Italian for cousin, but a term of endearment between Bob and me). It’s at least 250 yards,” Bob commented, with just second’s left before I’d shoot.

I slide the safety off and held tight. One by one they came and then there appeared the white one. As it passed by, the nose of the big male was already making its way into the gap and I gave it just a half second longer before I squeezed the trigger. The Valmet broke
the stillness of that crisp morning and for the first time I heard the ‘thwap’ sound myself.

“You nailed him cugino!” said Bob looking through his binoculars. “He’s already falling behind the rest of the herd.”

Frikkie started jabbering in Afrikaans to Esak, who took off like a beagle after a rabbit. Once more we were running through the dry grass and keeping a watchful eye on our tracker. It didn’t take him long to locate the blesbok and start whistling. The animal was down and could not get up. If Esak hadn’t been so quick it would have been dead by the time we got there. My bullet entered just above the right shoulder and exited the other side. Frikkie put a mercy shot into him and then turned to me.

“Where did you learn to shoot like this?”

“Frikkie, I have my own private gun range in the back yard. I hand load everything and I probably fire a few thousand rounds a year of pistol, rifle and shotgun. I’ve been shooting for almost 40 years.”

Our PH looked at the ground for a while. Something was on his mind. He rubbed his chin and glanced around a bit, and then finally he turned about and looked me right in the eye.

“Okay. I’m going to stop yelling at you.”

Well, that was a relief anyway. It appears that a lot of people who book a safari are what I call “casual” shooters. They get out their paper targets and just before they leave for Africa, they bench rest their rifles and if they hit the paper and the group is decent, they are satisfied. No one ever tells them that there are no benches to shoot from when you are in the bush. As a matter of fact, you shouldn’t even count on “shooting sticks” because some outfitters don’t use them. Then there is the chance you will have to take a few shots free hand, so you really ought to practice these different positions and styles before you head into the veldt. I was certainly thankful that I had.

We propped up the blesbok by putting a forked stick under his chin. He really was a beauty. Esak took some sand and carefully sprinkled it on the exit hole the bullet had made. As we began
taking pictures, Esak high tailed it back to the Toyota, which was about three-fourths of a mile away.

“This is what I call hunting, Frikkie,” I told him. “Getting off your rear end and heading into the bush and having to work for it.”

This early morning hunt reminded me of a 1957 story in Field and Stream by Robert Ruark, entitled: Earned and Collected. In this superb tale he relates the trials and tribulations of going after a really fine cape buffalo. He writes: “So you walk. You walk four miles, carrying your double rifle by the barrels, plus a spare gun with scope if the grass is short and you might have to take a long shot if you can’t crawl any farther. By crawl I mean crawl.”

All right, you get the picture; it wasn’t that dramatic, but it was a lot more satisfying than shooting from the front seat of a Toyota. Esak drove up with the Land Cruiser and we heaved the
blesbok onto the truck bed. Back to camp we went. A quick breakfast for us; another skinning and gutting job for Esak and Alfred.

“So Frikkie, tell me, who were the worst clients you ever had on safari?” I asked, in between pouring the mango juice and coffee.

“Two separate incidents come to my mind,” Frikkie said between bites. “One was a group of Americans, the others Spaniards. With the Americans I sorted it out, but with the Spaniards, I sent them home early.”

Seems like the group from America (about seven hunters total) was organized and paid for by a millionaire from Colorado. He took care of virtually everything. He also thought he knew everything. From the moment they were all settled in, this arrogant Coloradoan began telling Frikkie in front of the entire group that he didn’t know what he was doing. For example; he said Frikkie didn’t have a clue how to set bait, that the blinds were in the wrong position, that the equipment was inferior. This went on and on through lunch and then again at dinner. It was getting so obnoxious that the other hunters began to look down at the floor whenever this guy opened his mouth. But none of them had the guts to reprimand him either.

Next morning the group headed out. Frikkie set everyone up in their spots, but for the malcontent he found the “ideal” blind. It was camouflaged to perfection, and up on a hilltop about 40 yards away, you could just barely see the rim of a water hole. All day this fellow stayed put. When the pick up time came near dusk, Frikkie made sure to get him last. Everyone else nailed something that first day, but the blowhard saw nothing. At dinner that night he was even worse, brow beating Frikkie that he was incompetent and that he shouldn’t have been skunked.

Frikkie shrugged. This is hunting after all; so he convinced the guy to give it a try just one more time. At dusk on the second day Frikkie made his rendezvous with the millionaire. He had a completely dejected look on his face. The conversation went something like this:

“Did you see anything?”
“Not a damn thing, Frikkie. What in the hell am I doing wrong?”

“Oh, you actually want my opinion?”

“Well uh,” and looking rather sheepishly he said: “Yeah, I do.”

“Let’s take a stroll to the rim of the water hole.”

Uphill they walked and when they crested the top, it all became quite clear.

“This water hole is bone dry. I’ve been sitting next to a dry waterhole for two days!”?

“That’s right,” said Frikkie, looking him dead in the eyes.

What followed was one of those long pauses when a man, even one whose strong suit isn’t humility, takes stock of himself and his situation. The next thing he utters is going to make or break the entire safari.

“I’ve been a real [expletive] Frikkie. I’m sorry, tell me what to do.”

The rest of the hunt went just fine.

This could not be said of the four Spaniards however. Only one of them spoke English, and he wasn’t very good at it. Frikkie took them all out in the Land Cruiser and had the one fellow translate the shooting protocol. Only the guy in the front seat shoots!

Away they drove. Frikkie and the shooter (the one who spoke a little English) were discussing and pointing out some eland bulls when the three hunters on the elevated bench just opened up with rifle fire.

“It was like a bloody broadside from one of those Spanish galleys,” Frikkie told us, laughing now, but livid then.

Between the muzzle blasts and the bullets whizzing over his head, Frikkie was fit to be tied. When all the yelling was through,
and the cursing played out, they finally got down to some serious translation. Short answer; they couldn’t just sit there and do nothing—they had to kill something! Things got worse on the next day and the day after.

“They couldn’t stop talking, even when we were closing in on a fine kudu they were jabbering away! I sent the crazy bastards home. I lost money on that hunt, but at least I was alive at the end of it,” he said smirking.

Brunch was finished, and the day was young. With the blesbok now butchered and put away, Frikkie was anxious to get going on another animal. This was the gemsbok, although some people refer to it as an Oryx.

“So when do Esak and Alfred get a day off, Frikkie?” I asked.

“They don’t. The rule is simple. When there are hunters in camp, they work. Since you are here for 12 days, they will work 12 straight days in a row. I cannot run this business without them. But, when there is a lull between clients, then they get those days off. But never more than say two or three. There is always a lot of work to be done on safari.”

Esak and Alfred certainly have it tough, but as I mentioned in a previous article they are a lot better off than their peers. One thing I did before I left the States was inquire as to whether or not either man had children. Alfred didn’t, but Esak has a three-year-old girl. Now most guys who go on safari think they are being generous by leaving some of their clothing and gear behind as gifts to the skinners, trackers, camp cooks etc. (Esak was wearing a cap that said Lexus). And although this is very appreciated, what is really needed are items for children. I asked my two daughters to go through their closets and toy chests and pull out every trinket and piece of clothing that either didn’t fit, or they got tired of playing with. By the time I left Minnesota, I had one full suitcase of clothing, including a child’s winter coat and toys for Esak’s little girl (who, by the way, I only got to see twice and never discovered her name). Also in the mix I brought small bags of ground coffee (without chicory), aspirin, footwear, pens and paper. Neither of Frikkie’s employees could speak English, but we were informed that they were very grateful for the gifts we brought.
The four of us headed back out in the Toyota in search of gemsbok; Oryx gazella. This very large antelope has a most striking appearance, specifically its long spear-like horns. These ringed horns can grow in excess of 30 inches and make for formidable weapons. Bulls can measure about 47 inches at the shoulder, and can easily weigh over 500 pounds. These animals feed mostly on leaves, grasses and herbs. If faced with drought-like conditions they will dig for succulents such as tsama melons. They have black and white facial markings, black side stripes on their flanks and a long black tail. Both bulls and cows have horns, the males being somewhat shorter and thicker.

We drove around for about 45 minutes. Three of us were using binoculars, but Esak used the naked eye. Perhaps this is a good spot to mention just a few words about optics. We all know the great brands, and the great prices they command. I’ve used them and yes, there is a difference. But in my situation, where the animals were in the 100–250 yard range, a pair of $125 binoculars worked out just fine. The only time I can honestly say they failed was at dusk. The higher end models gathered the last few bits of light and made seeing game possible, whereas my binoculars were like looking into a black hole.

Esak spotted a small herd of gemsbok, and made this “weesh, weesh, weesh” sound and started waving his hands, in order for us to notice.

“There’s a really nice bull in there, Cholly. See him? He is on the far left.”

Using the binoculars, I got a really good look at this fellow. Frikkie switched off the ignition and the four of us slowly made our way towards them. Esak, unflappable, was in the lead. He impressed the heck out of me now, but in a few days’ time he would blow me away with his talents. He was on the spoor and we began winding our way around bushes, shrubs and small trees. There are some unsettling aspects to walking about the sands of South Africa. One of the things that really bothered me was the number of holes and burrows we encountered. At any moment I figured some ornery honey badger, or some other desert devil that I couldn’t even hazard a guess at, would just come screaming out of one of those
holes and make a bee-line for me. Though nothing happened, I never let myself linger in front of one of these openings for more than a few seconds.

Esak started waving his hand again, but there were no “weesh, weesh, weesh” sounds this time. I duck-squatted my way towards him and he pointed out the bull for me. This would be a free-hand shot of about 100 yards or so. The wind was right and my snap practicing of the Valmet paid off as the sight picture was crystal clear. On the crease of the left shoulder I placed the crosshairs and squeezed. The majestic bull dropped in his tracks, tried to get up, and then fell down again: stone cold dead.

We took our photos and between the four of us we got him into the truck. This “One-Shot Bwana” moniker might actually come true, I thought. I can only hope that with two animals left on my list I would continue this lucky streak.

I had taken the best bull Frikkie had to offer, and Bob wanted an Oryx as well. Time to go to Madiakgama and pay our respects to
Jimmy and Linda. But it was late in the day and you don’t just “drop in” on these people. With his cell phone Frikkie made the call and the arrangements were set for early the next morning.

Bob and I kicked back in the beautiful lounge area. The scotch, Famous Grouse, was sliding down pretty effortlessly. We both marveled at how well things were turning out for us. The Cape buffalo was very unfortunate, but as Bob pointed out, hunting is not a controlled laboratory experiment; things go wrong and in our case that’s just what happened.

Frikkie made a grand entrance with four long racks of pork ribs. It was going to be another night of carnivore heaven. With the wood fire crackling, and the oil for the Frikkie fries heating up, we were in for another grand meal. This time, a leaf salad was part of the menu and it was so nice to finally have some greens again. Every night, Little Frikkie would dine with us. He was going to be a PH like his dad. Although only three years old, his grasp of Afrikaans was pretty impressive; however, his English was almost nonexistent. In preparation for his career as a professional hunter he already had quite an array of toy guns.

“I took my first animal at age five,” Frikkie told us. “I want Little Frikkie to get something at age four-and-a-half.”

Based on what Bob and I saw, we have no doubt that he will top his father’s childhood record. As it was, Little Frikkie would ride with us at every opportunity, especially when we brought the game animals in. He had appeared fearless when he posed with me next to the eland.

As the ribs came off the grill, Frikkie brought out two bottles of barbecue sauce. I only mention this because they had the weirdest of product names. One was called “Gorilla Brains” and the other was “Monkey Glands.” Bob and I tried both, and although they were okay, neither had the “punch” that we both expected.

The meal was winding down, the cognac was poured, and the cigars lit. A great hunt in the veldt for all parties concerned. Bob and I were just about to say good night to our PH when the entire place was plunged into darkness.
“Those [expletive] incompetents!” railed Frikkie. “God knows when the power will come back on.”

Little did we know how profound and prophetic that statement would be. As the new black government has taken over the reins of power in South Africa, they are trying to fill positions that were formerly held by whites only. One of the areas that needed beefing up was the electric company. So a lot of whites were fired, and quite simply, a lot of blacks were hired. Problem is, the on-the-job training they received was pretty lackluster. As a consequence, power outages can go on for hours, sometimes days!

Frikkie returned with candles, and Bob and I finished our Martel cognacs and Monte Cristo cigars in the flickering light. The darkness also brought out those miserable cats again. We did our best with a BB gun, but firing into the dark was probably going to break a window. We called it quits a little early that night, and with our small flashlights made our way to the huts. There would be no hot shower before bed this evening. I got into my sleeping attire but I could feel the dirt and grime. “Oh well, all part of the adventure,” I thought.

Monday morning I awoke without Frikkie’s assistance, and gazed out the window. Still total darkness. The power had not been restored yet. I decided to risk it, and took a really fast shower, if for no other reason to get the trail dust off. The water was tepid, but I got through it. With flashlight in hand, I made my way over to the dining hall. Frikkie had set up a propane tank with a top-mounted circular heating element.

“Hot coffee or tea is all we can hope for this morning. Still no power, and I don’t have the means to cook a proper breakfast,” Frikkie informed me.

I sipped some scalding hot tea, and putting those “dog biscuits” on the right side of my mouth, chomped down, so as to get some sort of organic matter into my system. Bob joined us a few minutes later and he sipped some instant coffee. All in all it was one of the more unpleasant mornings.

We packed up the newer Land Cruiser, and with Esak in tow we headed out for Madiakgama. I rode in the cab with Frikkie, and
Bob sat on the bed of the truck with Esak. There was little for them to talk about, but even if Esak could speak English, it wouldn’t have mattered as the road noise was deafening.

“Got to get some diesel,” said Frikkie, and he pulled off into a service station.

Almost all stores in South Africa that sell fuel offer “full service only” for their customers. A gas jockey comes out, pumps your fuel, washes your windshield and even checks under the hood. I hadn’t seen this sort of thing since the early 1970s. But I suppose at $6 a gallon it is the least they can do! But those dog biscuits were not going to hold me for very long, so I left the truck and went into the little store to buy something. There wasn’t much available, but on the counter I saw little bags of dried fruit. I purchased two, and headed back to the vehicle. Off we went for another visit to Jimmy and Linda’s.

“Care for some dried fruit, Frikkie?” I asked my PH.

“Dried fruit? What the hell are you talking about, that’s biltong!”

Sure enough, it was biltong (jerky). It looked like dried fruit to me. I’d never had it before, so what the heck, I gave it a try. I’m not going to say that it was great, and I won’t say it was inedible; but it was very chewy and far too fatty for my tastes. But to quote from a passage by Victor Hugo; “an empty stomach has no nose.”

The ride to Madiakgama, as always, was a memorable one. This time, and for the only time in my entire stay, I was starting to get carsick from the bouncing we were doing. After what seemed an eternity we made it to the front gate, and I started to exit the truck.

“What the hell are you doing, Cholly?” Frikkie asked me.

“I’m opening the gate so Bob and Esak don’t have to climb out of the back of the bed.”

“Sit down,’ he said to me rather reproachfully. “When Esak is riding with us, he opens the gate.”
Now I didn’t want to start in with my PH about etiquette, so I said rather innocently that I would respect any time-honored traditions and let it go at that. However, the more I thought about it, the more I began to realize that if I had opened the gate, Esak would have “lost face.” Simply put, it is his job to do this. It would have been just as insulting if I had told him that I prefer to skin and gut my own animals.

Eventually we wound our way to the main house. “Jock,” the bull terrier, and his pals were there to greet us. As he approached me, he rolled onto his back and I began to give him a tummy rub. His little stub of a tail was wiggling back and forth like a pendulum on steroids.

“He likes you Cholly,” said Linda, who, with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, had come out of the main house upon hearing the Land Cruiser.
“Linda, I love this dog. He’s so nice and gentle. I’d like to bring him back to the States with me.”

“You can have him, but it will cost you about four thousand dollars for the permits to get him out of here.”

“I don’t love him that much. But I still think he is adorable.”

“Let me tell you something. Jock is one tough s.o.b. About two months ago he grabbed a black mamba right behind the head. He bit it and shook it for about fifteen minutes. No amount of yelling on my part could break his grip. Eventually it died. The snake was about 10 feet long.”

So much for my idea of a gentle animal!

Linda had her blacks pack the truck up with ears of corn and bales of alfalfa. We were going out quite a distance to one of their better water holes. This particular spot attracted just about every kind of animal they had there, except for the rhino, who, for reasons known only to them, had staked out a different spot to quench their thirst.

On and on Linda drove. I am, as I write this, still in awe of the animals we saw along the way. But of the many that scattered at our approach, the family of giraffes seems to stick out for some reason. They are so massive, and much like an ostrich, they ran a wee bit, hid behind some flora for cover, and then gazed down at us from the treetops.

This particular water hole was fed by a series of underground pipes. Because of the drought they could only keep about six water holes going on 40,000 acres. This meant some stiff competition, and a certain pecking order as to who could drink first. We would observe some strange drinking habits, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself.
As Linda eased her Land Cruiser near the water hole, about 20 animals, which had been loitering about, scattered. However, they didn’t run off that far; perhaps about a hundred yards or so. As the blacks scattered alfalfa and corn, Bob, Frikkie, and I scurried up a primitive wooden ladder and entered a “tree house” of a hunting blind. How the ladder held Frikkie I’ll never know. There were three lawn chairs inside and we settled down for what very well could be an all day siege, waiting for the many animals to return. We made sure the walkie-talkie was in working order, since we were a long way from the main house. The noise and distraction Linda and her workers made covered any sounds the three of us produced setting ourselves up. With a wave of her hand, Linda drove off, and now we began Bob’s hunt for an Oryx.

I had made a promise to Bob that since I could never pay him back for his generosity, I would keep a journal, and when we returned, I would compile our adventure just for the two of us. As a consequence, I had already filled over 50 pages with notes and observations. I carried five pens and two notebooks in my backpack. Even the smallest of details I recorded. Frikkie, like he
was hitchhiking, made a pointing gesture with his thumb in my direction.

“So what’s up with Cholly?” he said to Bob. “I’ve never seen anyone write so much. I’ll bet he got beat up a lot in school.”

Little did I know that when I returned to the States, I would be asked to chronicle this entire safari for the world to see, via the website of Blue Book Publications, Inc. I smiled at Frikkie, but continued to put pen to paper.

In about 30 minutes the creatures of Madiakgama began to slink out of the brush. The wart hogs, “tough little bastards,” as Frikkie described them, came in first for a drink of cool water. According to our PH, when their head is down and they are slurping away, that is the best time to drop one. The sounds made by lapping up the water drown out their auditory senses, so it is at that moment, especially with a bow, that you take your shot.

Suddenly there appeared the eland. Now the eland is a real slob when it comes to water holes. Where everyone else observes a sense of decorum and etiquette by standing in the dirt, and then dipping their heads to drink; the eland is like an uncouth dinner guest. They actually stand with all four hooves in the water, and drink until they feel satiated. At 1,500 pounds, there’s a lot of drinking to do. Take the big five out of the equation, and the eland is the king of the water hole. After they had their fill, they sauntered over to the corncobs and now the gemsbok, wildebeest and then impala, slowly approached for their turns.

“Look at that gemsbok, Frikkie,” I whispered, slowly pointing to one who was nearing his way closer to drink, “The perfect birth defect.”

“He will live a long life if he can avoid the lions and leopards. No one will ever want him for a trophy.”

This Oryx may have had an inferiority complex like Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, but he didn’t know how lucky he was. Although he had one very long nicely pointed horn; the other one was bent way backwards, and seemed to almost follow the curvature of a half moon. A non–trophy for any serious hunter, but almost guaranteed longevity for the freak.
We were about an hour and a half into this hunt when a very nice gemsbok sauntered its way in. Frikkie immediately glassed him and whispered to Bob that he was the nicest in the lot. So Bob put down his Nelson DeMille novel, and slowly got his act together for a shot. There was so much smacking between the corn cobs, alfalfa and water slurping that I could hear it up in the blind. It was going to be about a forty-yard shot however, as this bull refused to come over to the far side of the hole where the corn and alfalfa were. He stared into the blind and took quick short sips. He didn’t like something, but he wasn’t sure what it was. The animal finally turned away from us, and this is when Frikkie gave the “do it” nod to Bob.

Bob drew back, put his pin on him and released. This old bull didn’t get old by being careless. He “jumped” the arrow, and it caught him behind the shoulders and high towards the spinal column. As he snorted and jumped, the entire entourage went scurrying. As our bull ran off, he shed the arrow, and with his pals, they made their way into the scrub brush. A non-lethal shot for
sure. But blood was drawn, so Bob “bought it” no matter what happened next.

“He’ll come back,” said Frikkie. “Hunger and thirst are very motivating forces. But we will have to wait a long time.”

And wait, we did. While some of the animals drifted back, the herd of gemsbok was nowhere to be seen. Hours passed, and I had not had any solid food in over half a day. The three of us were making so many gastric rumbling sounds, that if it weren’t for the feeding noises, nothing would have ever come back.

“There they come,” said Frikkie, as the gemsbok made a return visit. “Let’s see if we can find the one you hit. He should have a trickle of blood on the left side.”

One by one they came in towards the blind, and cautiously began drinking or eating. But the big bull was nowhere to be seen.
Then we saw movement about 60 yards out behind some bushes and sure enough, there he was; a small stream of blood on the left side. From where he was, he could survey the entire situation. You could almost hear the mental thoughts of the three of us as we were trying to coax him in to take a drink. He moved a little bit toward us, and then to our astonishment, plunked himself down on the ground, and just lay there. We felt like the Three Stooges.

It was getting toward the hottest part of the day and the corn and alfalfa weren’t going to last much longer. But that gemsbok refused to move. He was watching the proceedings very carefully; looking for just one wrong move, just one little detail out of place. The thought of his pals eating and drinking to their hearts’ content must have been torture, but still the bull refused to move. Frikkie may swear like a savage, but he has the patience of a saint when it comes to hunting.

“He’ll come in, Bop. It’s too great a temptation for him to just lie there,” he whispered.

Another fifteen minutes passed and then suddenly our bull got to his feet. His senses on overdrive he slowly came towards the water hole. Bob had his bow ready and Frikkie was going to squeeze his arm for the moment to release. I had the camcorder going and from my comfortable position had everything in the view finder.

Our PH gave the signal and the arrow went screaming on its way. This time the old bull’s reflexes were not fast enough. The arrow went in very deep just over the shoulder. He was off and running, as was everything else, but he was doomed.

The walkie-talkies went into action and Linda, along with her trackers and Esak, were headed for the blind to pick us up. About ten minutes passed before the Land Cruiser showed up. As we put our gear into the truck the three trackers were off in pursuit of Bob’s Oryx.

If ever I was an escaped convict, there’s no way in the world I would want Esak and his two pals after me. I don’t care how fast you can go, or how clever you are, they are going to find you. An arrow wound is unlike a bullet hole. There isn’t that much to go on sometimes, and our bull had run off with the herd. How these guys
could pick up who was who, and follow it in this maze of hoof prints, is a sight to behold. I’ll never know what the conversation was between this trio of trackers. Perhaps there was a disagreement; perhaps there was some other minor detail. But whatever it was, they were relentless. In about 20 minutes they had found the Oryx. He had gone off the trail and into the bush and settled down under a shrub where it expired. Bob’s arrow was dead on this time, right through the heart and lungs. By the time it had decided to lie down it was leaving quite a blood trail. I’m sure that the last few yards of tracking Esak could have done blindfolded.

Photos were taken, and the gemsbok loaded up onto the truck bed. All of us rode back to the main house. Esak had to skin and gut, while Frikkie, Bob and I had lunch with Jimmy and Linda. These folks sure know how to put on a spread. There were three different kinds of meats, plus fruits and coffee (real coffee, not instant) and mango juice. After a little over 15 hours of hunger pangs, the three of us were eating like condemned criminals. Oh, and by the way,
there’s no such thing as a non-smoking area at most of these places.

Jimmy however, was a bit upset this fine day.

“Someone came in last night and stole ten head of our cattle. I found the cut fence and the tracks leading out,” Jimmy said with a sigh of despair.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Jimmy! You’ve got cattle rustler’s way out here?” I asked incredulously.

“Oh sure,” he replied. “It happens more often than you think.”

“Well, since you have the best trackers in the world, why don’t you just track these guys down?” I persisted.

“It’s not that simple. We have to notify the authorities and they conduct the investigation. But by the time they get here, the animals are loaded up onto lorries and they are miles away.”

Frikkie, never one to mince words, interrupted Jimmy’s next sentence.

“In the old days we hunted the bastards down and then we shot them,” he said, munching on a sausage. “Things have gone to [expletive] in South Africa!”

It was getting on mid-afternoon. We were stuffed, Esak had finished his processing of the gemsbok and had been fed, so there was nothing left to do but head home. The ride out of Madiakgama was never easy, but somehow this time it didn’t seem quite so bad. In about an hour we were back at Frikkie’s main camp.

Bob and I had a nice intermezzo before dinner. Kicking back in the lawn chairs, smoking a few cigars and enjoying some bourbon, we got down to dredging up some of the more pleasant memories we have shared these past three decades. It seemed like we were always laughing, and I can only wonder what the hired hands must have been thinking.
Frikkie came out of the main house and approached us. He had a strange look on his face.

“I hope you guys like Africa, because you just may be here longer than you think,” Frikkie said matter-of-factly.

“What in the world are you talking about?” Bob asked.

“Natasha just got it off the radio. South African Air went on strike. There are no flights coming in or going out. Thousands of people are stranded at the airport. It seems like they do this every other year. This time, it is the flight attendants who walked out. But don’t worry, they usually settle in a few days.”

We had five glorious days left on our safari before we headed for Johannesburg and home. Surely everything would be worked out by then. Bob poured us both another bourbon. Life in the veldt was getting better every day.

“So Frikkie, what’s on the grill tonight?” he asked.
Part VI– Impala, Wildebeest and the Long Journey Home

Linda was already standing in the driveway as we pulled into Madiakgama. Her feet were set apart a little more than necessary. She had a clenched fist on each hip. She also had a look on her face that would have made a wounded Cape buffalo think twice about charging. Problem was, she was looking directly at me.

As I approached I could feel her gaze. It reminded me of a biography I had read many years ago about how Mussolini would receive guests. Il Duce would be seated behind his large ornate desk. Dignitaries would have to walk the length of this very long room, with the Italian dictator staring them down the entire way. It was Benito’s way of “sizing up a man.”

“What’s up with her?”, I asked myself.

“So Cholly, what caliber rifle did you bring to Madiakgama in order to shoot one of my little impala?” asked Linda.

Now remember, this is a “bow” ranch, and only by virtue of Frikkie’s long friendship is a gun hunter allowed. After I knew I had regained control of my large intestine, I very softly said; “Linda, all I have is a thirty-o-six Springfield.”

“That’s all you need!” she exploded. “I am sick of you people coming to Africa to shoot these little creatures with 375s, 300s, and 338s. I can kill any animal on this property with a point two-two. Bullet placement is everything!”

“I agree one hundred percent.”

“Good, because I am going to drive you out to your spot and if something should show up along the way I want to be there so I can make sure that you don’t [expletive] this up.”

“Just great,” I thought to myself. I finally got Frikkie to stop yelling at me, and now I have Linda, watching me like a hawk.

Linda got into the driver’s seat, while Bob, Frikkie, and I climbed into the back of the Land Cruiser. This was Jimmy’s vehicle and the bed of the truck was set up with a bench and rails. I had the
Valmet in my hands on the off chance we would stumble onto a herd before we hit the water hole. It was a smart move on my part.

The impala (Aepyceros melampus) is a graceful but noisy creature. It is similar to our North American antelope and a little like our whitetail deer in appearance. The males have two lyre-shaped horns and it is the symmetry and length of those horns that one is looking for. The impala averages anywhere from 88 to 145 pounds. Males are very territorial, and it seems they have a propensity for making all sorts of sounds. Speed and agility are the two traits that keep them from being a predator’s main course.

We were cruising through the brush when Frikkie spotted about 40 trotting impala. He had his Nikons on them and picked out a beauty with very nice horns. How he can make these judgment calls so quickly is a testament to his 35 years in the bush. Linda saw them as well and the truck came to an abrupt halt. She cut the ignition, and Frikkie pointed out which one to shoot. Even though we were doing this from the truck, I didn’t have the gall to confront Linda. Besides, if she had a problem with it, she wouldn’t have stopped the vehicle.

I steadied the Valmet on the upper side rail, and tried to get a glimpse of the nice male in the scope. I finally picked him out as he was now going full blast for thick cover. Unknown to me, his girlfriend was running behind him. She was gaining so much ground that she was about to overtake him. For reasons I still don’t know today, I just felt that the shot, about 80 yards or so, was right. As the male ran past a bush and was just about to dive into thick shrubs, I fired.

Then all hell broke loose. Linda jumped out of the cab and I thought, “Here it comes now.”

“What a shot! You can hunt with me any time you want. Do you always take head shots?”

“You mean I hit it? I lost sight of it at the recoil.”

“Hit it? Why you drilled it right in the back of the head! Not a single ounce of meat is going to waste with a shot like that. But tell me Cholly; do you always take head shots?”
And here is where I made an error in judgment. I should have lied, but I told her the truth.

“Linda, I was actually aiming for the shoulder. How I hit it in the back of the head is beyond me.”

“Ah, so it was a lucky shot, then?”

“I’ll say it was lucky,” Bob said. “You missed dropping that doe by a split second. She was almost about to overtake him when you fired. You should have seen how she nearly stopped in her tracks when her boyfriend went cart-wheeling into the dust.”

We took some photos, and Linda insisted on one with just the two of us. As she held my hand in a congratulatory grip, I realized how tough she was. Her hand was like a Brillo pad! No dishpan hands here. Hard physical labor had formed the calluses.

This was a beautiful impala. Later, over some Castle Lagers, I discovered that it was the nicest one taken in about three months. On the ride back to the skinning station Frikkie told me in hushed tones that I should never have told Linda the truth.

“She is going to break your [expletive expletive] over lunch,” he informed me.

Linda drove the Toyota over to the skinning station where Esak had been waiting patiently for a few hours. Protocol demands that he do nothing, no matter how long the wait, as he is in Frikkie’s employ only. Our PH single-handedly grabbed the impala from the bed and dropped it on the concrete pad. There was a verbal exchange of some sort. Apparently Esak was wondering where the wound was. When Frikkie showed him the little hole in the back of the head, Esak wanted to know who did the shooting. When he heard the answer, he smiled and then laughed. I took it to be the highest of compliments. But I guess I’ll never know.

Lunch at Madiakgama is always a refreshing affair, and today was no exception. We dined on hamburgers, eggs, toast, fresh coffee and mango juice. There is always an abundance of food, so two to three servings per person is the norm. Jimmy dropped in
from moving tons of sand on the windswept road and joined us. Then the breaking began.

“Jimmy, you should have seen what Cholly did. He shot an impala right in the back of the head at a full run. It was the luckiest [expletive] shot I have seen in a long time. Cholly, you should have lied through your [expletive] teeth. Now I’ll never know how good a shot you are.”

Well, one thing for sure about these Boers—they don’t hold back on anything. I smiled bashfully, and told Linda that I couldn’t have lived with myself if I had not spoken truthfully. She called me another name and then, thankfully, we moved on to other topics.

One of the topics of great concern right now is the future of safari in South Africa. Even as I type these lines many changes are already taking place. A government report released in November called for some sweeping reforms in the industry. Shooting from a vehicle is just one of the many practices that will soon be forbidden.
Although I do not approve of the practice, now that I have had five months to think things over, one or two details come to mind. Foremost of these is the stamina (or should I say lack of stamina), in some clients. Let’s be honest. By the time you have amassed enough money to hunt Africa, you are more often than not in your 50s, 60s or beyond. This also means that you are probably not the finest of physical specimens either. I spoke to one of Frikkie’s references, who sounded like he was on oxygen. I wondered how he survived the flight—no less the hunt! Does a wealthy 72-year-old really want to camp in a tent, sleep on a cot, and have to walk out into pitch darkness to locate the toilet? I’m convinced that many clients would decline or simply suffer a heart attack if they had to do the running that we did for the blesbok. Like it or not, this is a money-making industry, so shooting from the vehicle was probably an evolutionary process based on the necessity to get trophies into the hands of hunters whether or not truly past their prime. I’ll probably take some flak for this, but it’s the way I see it.

Jimmy had to get back on the grader so he said his goodbyes and drove to the main road. We lingered a bit at the dining area. Time had gotten away from us and it was just too late to get any more hunting in that day. We packed up our gear, and after making sure that Esak had finished skinning the impala we made our way back to Frikkie’s main camp. As we drove down the road, Jimmy began waving from the grader and shouted for us to stop.

“Frikkie, something has killed and dragged off one of my baby calves.”

Since this conversation was taking place in Afrikaans, Esak immediately leapt from the bed of the Toyota and was on the drag marks. Truly a marvel to behold, Esak, whose father was a tracker, is to Frikkie what Silent was to Peter Hathaway Capstick.


Once again I thought to myself: we are witnesses to the life and death struggle that is a daily occurrence in Africa. Jimmy sure had his hands full this week, between the cattle rustlers and the leopards. Esak, his face sometimes just 12 inches from the ground,
pointed out the direction the leopard had taken. But it was too late now for any retribution.

"Drag marks where a leopard grabbed a baby calf."

The crisp dry air, followed by warm afternoons, had cracked our lips to the point that we were sharing a tube of Chapstick. Of all the things to pack, who would have thought we’d need an item like that! I was peeling little pieces of dried skin from my lips as we pulled into camp.

Dinner that night was spaghetti with a meat sauce. Bob and I looked at each other cautiously. One shouldn’t prepare dishes like that for two Italians who have grandmothers and mothers who have a three-star Michelin rating. But Bob and I are gracious guests and we ate heartily, without complaint.

The long drive, coupled with the fresh air, wore us down a bit that day. We had our usual cognac and cigar but turned in around nine. We were going back to Madiakgama very early the next
morning, as Bob wanted an impala and a warthog to add to his trophy room.

We were both up at 6 AM and headed over to the dining area. We boiled some water and made some instant coffee and tea. Frikkie came out with a large tray. “Breakfast,” he said rather proudly. Finally, I thought to myself.

There were three plates, and behold, we had toast that was covered with last night’s spaghetti! I’ve had some strange things for breakfast, but this was a first for me. I got a couple of mouthfuls down, but it just didn’t set right. I waited until Frikkie had left the table, grabbed three Ouma Rusks (the real name of the dog biscuits), and put them in my jacket pocket.

A few hours later found us in the same blind from which Bob had nailed his gemsbok. We watched the ritual of animals as they came to the waterhole. Finally, about 25 impala closed in for a cool morning drink. Frikkie pointed out a male for Bob. As I said earlier, the impala is a very fast creature and we were to see just how fast in a few seconds. Bob waited for the perfect clear moment to release and no sooner was the arrow on its way when the impala “jumped it.” This shot went high, and hit the spine. The animal was down with the back legs paralyzed. As it tried to crawl away, Frikkie and Bob descended the tree stand, while I continued filming. Our PH got a hold of the horns and, pushing them to the ground, stood on them thereby anchoring it. Bob then plunged a rather large hunting knife into the heart/lung region. A fountain of blood gushed from the impala. It was over in a few more seconds.

We radioed Linda and in about fifteen minutes they pulled up and placed the impala on the truck bed. There was way too much blood here for us to continue, so Linda suggested another spot where there were some fine warthogs.

Frikkie knows Madiakgama like the back of his hand. So he drove his own truck to the second water hole. This particular spot had a large metal-framed blind about 15 yards from where the animals came in. At the top was a “house” with a heavy front shutter, which had to be propped open with a steel rod. One had to climb a tall metal ladder in the rear, which led to a locking door. The frame, however, was twisted, and in one spot, caved in a bit.
“Hey Frikkie, is this thing safe? Look at how the framing is bent and crushed in.”

“Don’t worry Cholly. It will hold us. The rhinos did all that damage. If they don’t like something, they just smash it.”

And then, almost right on cue, out of the scorched bush there appeared four rhinos. One was a very large male. The others consisted of a large female, another good-sized male, and a baby. The rhino gets its name from two ancient Greek words. Rhino means “nose” and ceros means, “horn.” In short, it is the only mammal in the world that has a horn on its nose. That horn is very expensive. At Madiakgama it is $1,200 an inch. The biggest white rhino, the one who was looking right at us, had a horn that measured 31 inches. So do the math. Most clients “dart” the rhinos on this game ranch, but even that can cost you about ten thousand
dollars. By the way, one of the recommendations in the report mentioned previously was a total ban on darting.

“Whatever you guys do,” whispered Frikkie, “don’t get between them and the Land Cruiser. If they charge, dive under the truck.”

These magnificent bruisers were only about 20 yards away from us. They don’t see very well but their hearing and sense of smell are exceptional. There are five living species of rhinoceros in the world. They are sometimes six feet at the shoulder, and can get close to eight thousand pounds! Luckily the wind was blowing in our faces, and although they knew something was going on, they didn’t appear to be too unsettled by our presence.

Before our arrival, Linda’s blacks had dropped off six bales of hay about ten feet from the water’s edge. Very slowly, all four of these prehistoric-looking creatures approached the food. What I found to be truly fascinating is that for their tremendous size, they can barely open their mouths. They nibbled the hay daintily as though it were hors d’oeuvres.
We gathered our gear and Bob and I very slowly made our way to the ladder and scurried up to the blind. It was painted black and it was like Dante’s Inferno once we got the metal door open and climbed inside. Frikkie drove off in the truck to hide it about 100 yards away. At the sound of the engine the rhinos scampered off, hardly making any noise despite their size. About ten minutes later our PH was walking back towards us. He was carrying his .458 Winchester Magnum, just in case he had an unfortunate run-in with the rhinos or some other beastie. Finally the three of us were set up and sitting in lawn chairs. The wait for a warthog began.

Hours passed by as we slowly began to roast like Mancini peppers. I had removed almost all of my clothing and was down to just a short sleeve shirt and slacks. The painted black surface was turning the blind into a sauna. Perhaps it was just too hot that afternoon, though Frikkie blamed a swirling and unpredictable
wind; whatever, things were definitely not going right. We had been in the blind now for close to four hours and eventually some species began to make their way in for a drink. There were gemsbok, eland and wildebeest; but the warthogs were nowhere to be seen.

“They have a very keen sense of smell,” Frikkie whispered. “With this swirling wind they have probably picked up our scent and are hiding out in the bush. But you should be prepared because at any second they will dash in for a drink.”

Half an hour later a nice warthog, certainly not a trophy, but respectable nonetheless, dashed in for a sip of what can best be described as green smelly water. Frikkie gave Bob the “nod,” and he stood up with the bow at full draw. Problem was, the little runt stopped at the nearer rim of the water hole. Bob had to stand up and point almost straight down to get a “pin” on him.

“Am I clear?” Bob whispered.

“Yes,” said Frikkie filming the action with his own video camera. I was filming as well, and, trusting our PH’s judgment call, never took my eye from the lens. Bob released and the arrow went flying. But it didn’t fly very far. Frikkie had been mistaken, and the broadhead hit the metal window ledge, shattering the blades in every which direction. Shards of metal exploded in our faces, but luckily no one was hurt. The impact was so great that the arrow actually curled a piece of the aluminum window sill. We had to use a pair of pliers to bend the rolled metal back into place so the next person in the blind wouldn’t be lacerated. There is no rocket science needed here; every creature, even those contemplating a drink, were long gone.

Despite the setback, we were determined to get a trophy. So we settled down in our lawn chairs and waited out the hot afternoon. It was about thirty minutes after the exploding arrow when I noticed that something was wrong with Frikkie. He had his right hand covering his eyes and his body was going into convulsions. He had tears pouring down his face. Then all of a sudden he just exploded into laughter.
“Bop, that’s the funniest [expletive] thing I have seen in a long time. That [expletive] warthog will never know how close he was to death,” he said between gasps for air.

Frikkie was still laughing when I started to laugh. Then Bob lost it, and he began guffawing. Before any of us knew it, we all had tears running down our cheeks and were now borderline hysterical.

“Linda is going to [expletive] when she hears how you tore up her expensive blind,” Frikkie said, sobbing with laughter.

As far as I was concerned, with an unpredictable wind, heat, and all the noise we had made, this day was over. But when you are on safari and time is starting to catch up on you, you stick it out as long as you can. The PH is the boss, so when he gives the word to pull out, then that is when you pack up. It was about 4 PM and I could sense that Frikkie saw the hopelessness of staying on. “Let’s get going,” he said. We began to pack up the gear, while our PH walked, with rifle in hand, to the Land Cruiser. Before long we were back at Linda’s main house so as to fill her in on our unfortunate episode. She took the news of the ruined windowsill very well.
While we were talking to Linda, a warthog came scurrying in from behind a bush and ran up to our hostess. As it got closer, it brushed up against her leg like a cat, and then rolled onto its back, where Linda proceeded to give him a “tummy rub.” Jock, the bull terrier, was jealous, so he got next to the little porker and got on his back as well. Bob looked like he swallowed a bee, to borrow a line from Raymond Chandler.

“Can you believe this? I’m in a tree house all day, sweating like hell, wreck an arrow, miss a nice warthog, and Linda is playing with one?”

July 27, 2005 was a special day for me. It was my birthday, and I was 52 years old. It was also my turn to go after the last animal on my list—Connochaetes taurinus. In Swahili, Nyumbu Ya Montu. In English, the wildebeest. Frikkie had a few names for them as well, like “little [expletive] tanks,” the “poor man’s Cape buffalo,”
and “the clowns of Africa.” Whatever you want to call them, they are indeed quite interesting.

The male and female of the species both have curving horns that are close at the base, curve outward, then inward and then slightly backward. This animal has the strangest of gaits. It looks as though it were put together with spare parts from other creatures. Frequently they will run around in circles, have multiple collisions, and otherwise look and act like an uncoordinated second-grade dance troupe. They have a large, box-like head. Their front section is built heavily, while the rear half is slender. Strictly grazers, they cannot last but a few days before needing water. Unlike others in the antelope family who give birth in rather secretive places, females have their young in crowded open areas, often right in the middle of the herd. Just like the blesbok, baby calves can stand and run within minutes of being born. Since the Serengeti wildebeest constitutes the largest mammal migration in the world, they’d better be tough.

Competing males have a ritual when it comes to territoriality or supremacy. Just like in the movies, they scrape their hooves, buck, snort, and duke it out. But the interesting behavioral aspect is that they usually smash their heads together when on their knees, with foreheads flat on the ground. Frikkie was quite blunt about hunting them. “Hit them well or you will have one hell of a chase on your hands. Sometimes it is like shooting a [expletive] tank!” was his professional opinion. And lest the reader think this animal poses no danger, it was in Chapter 15 of “Jock of the Bushveld” that Sir Percy was almost killed by a wounded Nyumbu Ya Montu.

We were packing up the 1978 Land Cruiser when Frikkie informed us that he had another problem. He had to prepare a few hundred pounds of eland for the long winter months. Alfred would help him hang the many strips of meat which would cure and eventually take the form of biltong, steaks, chops, etc.

“Here is the plan. Bop, you drive. Cholly, you sit in the front seat. Esak will go with you and with hand signals you should be fine. There are four wildebeest, however only one is a beauty. He measures over 28 inches. You should be in by ten o’clock and I’ll have brunch ready for you.”
And so, with the wave of his hands and a few crisp words to Esak, the three of us headed out in search of this quartet. Bob hadn’t driven a right-hand vehicle before, but he was doing a pretty admirable job as far as I was concerned. The toughest part was just maneuvering around the trees and bushes, as this Land Cruiser did not have power steering. Sometimes, he couldn’t make the turn at all. So, he tried to just run over things. When that didn’t work he had to find reverse, which is tricky when the floor shift is on your left. We’d been driving about for 45 minutes and still saw no sign of these animals. Come to think of it, in all the time we’d been out there, we had only spotted them once, and only for a fleeting moment. Then Esak started his “weesh weesh weesh” sounds and hand signals. He pointed way out to our right and there stood the four wildebeest. Mimicking like he had his right hand on a key, he made a gesture for Bob to cut the ignition. As he did, our tracker jumped from the vehicle, and waving, beckoned us to follow him. Bob and I were on the move and this is where we made a big mistake.

As far as we were concerned Esak just wanted us to go in and take a good look at these guys. Although I had my rifle, both Bob and I left our water bottles, binoculars and extra ammunition in the truck. I only had three cartridges. We should have known that Esak was from the old school. I can almost read his mind: “When you hunt with me, you hunt on foot; not from a truck.”

Off we went on what was about to be the most satisfying of all my trophies, but no one knew it yet. We got to within a hundred yards or so, and Esak, waving frantically, got me in for a shot. Slowly I raised the rifle and either motion or wind betrayed us, as the herd was off and running. I was a little angry at myself for not taking a fast snap shot, but I heeded Frikkie’s warning about placing the shot well on these creatures. Our tracker was nonplussed; this is his life and he loves it. He was off in a flash in pursuit, with Bob and I walking, and sometimes trotting, behind. This went on for about 30 minutes; and then waving us up and holding his index finger to his lips, pointed. There, about 200 yards away, was the herd. All I could see of the bull, however, was his hump. Perhaps, Esak thought, that if you can hit a running impala in the back of the head, this should be a cakewalk. He stood there, arms folded, his body language telling me “well, here it is—shoot!” I held the rifle as steadily as I could, lowered the crosshairs down a
bit, guessing where the heart/lung area was, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

“You nailed him cugino! He jumped straight up in the air. Nice shooting,” Bob said.

But you’d never know. The foursome took off at a very fast gallop and it didn’t look to me that he was even hurt. I figured a miss, and that perhaps the bullet was so close that he just jumped out of a reflex reaction. My “One-Shot Bwana” reputation was still intact.

Esak was on the move and in no time was at the spot where the wildebeest were previously huddled. No blood could be found. But that didn’t matter to him, as he was on the spoor like a hound. Caught up in the moment, Bob and I went running after him. This now put us out of sight of the vehicle. Our tracker worked in small concentric circles trying to decipher out of this myriad of hoof prints which one was the bull. On and on he walked, circling. He looked up and pointed about 200 yards away.

“Bool,” he said.

Bob and I followed his gaze and, sure enough, there they stood. The shot had made them skittish and they refused to come out from the clump of trees they were hiding in. I looked through the scope of the rifle but could not for the life of me discern which was the bull. I sure didn’t want to shoot a cow by accident. What we needed was a good pair of binoculars, except, as you already know, they were in the vehicle.

Within a few seconds the wildebeest were gone. Esak, who, as mentioned earlier in this series, speaks only a few words of English, was on them again. This got rough because now he was walking and walking and walking. I looked at my watch; he’d been at it for two hours. I studied him carefully. He seemed to be able to follow just that one set of hoof prints. Sometimes he would go around a bush or tree, then double back on his own tracks, and then head off in a totally different direction.

Two hours of walking may not seem like much for some people. But it was getting hot now, and we had nothing in the way
of water, food or optics. Esak got ahead of us at one point and Bob, who was just a few yards ahead of me, jumped backwards suddenly.

“Did you see that?” he yelled to me.

“See what?”

“Out of one of those damn holes, a big snake just came screaming out and tore off right in front of me!”

It must have been moving at a very good clip because I did not see it. I’d read before I left the States that the black mamba has a ground speed of 12 mph! Now that is only for a short burst of time, but that is pretty impressive in my book. I never liked walking past all of those holes in South Africa, and this confirmed it. A few feet either way and who knows what would have happened.

For another 20 minutes we continued following Esak, who kept a distance ahead of us of about 30 yards. It was going on eleven o’clock now, so we were one hour late by Frikkie’s calculations. Suddenly Bob just stopped in his tracks.

“Cugino, I have hunted all my life, and there is no way that this guy can still be on the spoor of these animals after two hours. There are hundreds of tracks out here, and he’s crossed two roads already. He’s just getting some “payback” in for all the sins committed by the white man against his people and Africa in general. We just happen to be the two idiot white guys that he’s taking for a nice long walk in the hot sand.”

I have great respect for Bob, for he has hunted all over the world. The possibility that Esak, good as he is, was still on the trail, seemed pretty remote to me as well. I told Bob that somehow we have got to communicate to him that it is time to call it quits. We’d found no blood at all, so I was now further convinced that the shot went high and he just “jumped” nervously. Frikkie did not tell me until the last day that Esak speaks Swahili. I just happen to know a little of that language and one of the phrases I do know sounds like this: “Nee ma choke a, naka see ah jah.” This roughly translates to “I am tired, hungry and thirsty.” In retrospect though, it was better that I never uttered the phrase.
Esak had stopped suddenly, so Bob and I closed the gap, fully prepared to use primitive sign language in order to convince him that we were privy to his shenanigans. Our tracker bent down and scooped the sand into his hands. As we got to within a few feet of him he turned around and showed it to us.

“Blut, (blood),” he said softly.

I only wish that there had been a camera to catch the “Kodak” moment that was on our faces. Hemingway, Ruark and Capstick couldn’t have described it, so I won’t make an attempt either. The drop of “blut” he showed us was the size of a green pea. How the heck he spotted that, after hours of tracking, is something that is going to be a memory until the day I die. So, I had hit the bull after all, but it was probably only a flesh wound. Blood was found, so I bought it, and moreover my moniker as the “One Shot Bwana” was history. Esak emptied his hands, walked about twenty yards or so, with us following, and said ever so softly: “Bool.”

I raised the Valmet, and as I did, the front swivel of the rifle sling squeaked ever so loudly. The herd was gone. Esak gave me a look that Helen Keller would have understood. I cursed that damn rifle, the damn sling, the damn scope and the damn imbeciles that are making gun importation more and more difficult for the safari hunter in South Africa. Esak’s annoyance didn’t last long, however. He was on the spoor again and Bob and I, now convinced of his abilities beyond the shadow of a doubt, would have followed him to Kenya.

We continued walking for another 30 minutes; thirsty, sweaty and both of us dealing with sore feet. Suddenly, Esak removed his cap (the grey Lexus one), and, waving us in, he once more pointed out the wildebeest. This time I tugged the sling tight. As I made my way towards our indefatigable tracker, out popped the bull from deep heavy brush into a clearing, presenting me with a clear broadside shot of about a hundred yards. I had the rifle up to my shoulder, put the crosshairs on him and fired. This bull just flopped over and created a cloud of dust when he hit the ground. He didn’t kick, jump up, or even tremble. It was over. Four-and-one-half hours after leaving the Land Cruiser I dropped my wildebeest. And what a beauty he was, measuring in at 29 1/2 inches!
My first shot had been high, the 180-grain bullet passing through the fleshy upper part of his hump. Bob was correct; I did hit him, but I was still about 12 inches off. It was a non-life-threatening wound, which meant this guy could have gone on for a very long time, possibly indefinitely. Frikkie was right about these animals—they really are tough. As the three of us marveled at the beauty of this creature we heard the newer Land Cruiser approaching. Frikkie had spotted the old bomb, and after hearing the shot, he was able to get a general idea as to where we were.

“You missed brunch, so I figured you were in the thick of it. Nice bool, Cholly. His spread is bigger than I thought.”

“Frikkie, you have got to communicate to Esak that as far as Bob and I are concerned he is the greatest tracker in the world. He was unbelievable. We are in awe of his talents.”

As our PH began to translate Esak got a big grin on his face. You could tell that he was very proud of what he had just done, and more importantly that the clients were satisfied. But in the end, Frikkie is the guy he has to please the most.
Pictures were taken, and I made sure that we took plenty. Bob and I were exhausted, and thankfully our PH had brought some water and Castle Lager with him. I had to sit down in the shade and relax a bit, as the heat of even a winter day was proving a bit much. Esak, however, had to walk back to the old Toyota and bring it in to haul the wildebeest.

“Okay, cugino. Point the direction you think the old Toyota is parked.” Now Bob knows that my sense of direction is lackluster but I think he just wanted to double check. So I pointed to my right, and he pointed to his left; and of course he was correct. In about 30 minutes we heard Esak coming, and with a rope, and some tugging, we got my bull into the truck. Back to the main house we went for a late brunch.

Birthdays seem to come and go, but this one will be indelible. After a hearty brunch/lunch we headed out to the beautifully manicured lawn and sat down with some expensive cigars. Wow, this was an event I shall never forget. Esak had finished the skinning and was back to raking the sand, the South African way of making the place look manicured. As he passed by, I lit a Dunhill cigarette for him and offered him a very fine cigar. The cigarette he smoked on the spot, but the Monte Cristo was tucked away in his jacket pocket to be enjoyed at another time.

“So Frikkie, just what kind of a man is Esak?” I asked.

“Well, Esak is the son of a tracker. He comes from the northeastern province. He has had a checkered past. His first wife and he used to leave here and walk to town. They’d tie one on at the pubs. Then one night on the walk home they got into an argument. He told me he was trying to frighten a black mamba that was headed for his wife, and that the brick accidentally hit her in the head. She had to get stitches and then they had a real fight. The marriage fell apart. Then he met Lillian. They had one child. One night I heard screams coming from their hut so I went over there to investigate. He was choking his wife and telling her that he was going to kill the baby next. I picked him up by the throat and jacked him up against the wall. I had him thrown into the drunk tank where he stayed for a few weeks. I then posted his bond and he was released into MY custody. I told him I’d tear his arm off before I sent him back to jail.
if he got out of line again. It’s been two years. He hasn’t touched a drop of alcohol and he dotes on his daughter. He has turned his life around.”

“I’m sure glad I didn’t offer him a Jack Daniels,” I thought to myself. But it just goes to show that everybody has a story. We finished our cigars and Bob and I moseyed over to the huts and took the only mid-day nap during the entire stay. We awoke around 6:00 to another wood fire in the dining hall. Tonight was kudu steaks, dry South African red wine, and some assorted vegetables. Dinner was finished, but before I could push away from the table, Natasha entered the dining hall. She was carrying a beautiful birthday cake. Then she produced a color montage, of six postcards, with every animal I had taken. “Cholly’s big six,” Frikkie said laughing. And if this wasn’t enough, our PH darted into the house and returned with a hand-carved stone sculpture of a lion. It weighed about five pounds.

“This is for you Cholly. You didn’t kill a lion, but you were there and you filmed it. That lion is a little part of you now. Please take this gift from all of us.” They then proceeded to sing “Happy Birthday.”

I was just about moved to tears. Everything was perfect and everything was coming together. A dear friend of over thirty years, a wild buffalo hunt, an even wilder lion hunt, coupled with an unforgettable number of experiences in between. Who could ask for more? We had our cake, smoked a few cigars, and washed it all down with cognac. I never slept better.

The morning of July 28, our final hunting day, had us in the Land Cruiser and headed for Madiakgama. Bob was determined to get a warthog and he wanted another impala as well. We didn’t see Linda or Jimmy on this last trip as they were both out in the fields throwing hay to cattle and supervising their work crews. Frikkie was driving toward the waterhole where Bob had nailed the gemsbok, when a herd of impala broke from cover. I was riding in the back and both of us watched them go into overdrive as they made their way deep into the interior—all except one. It would be the last mistake he would make on this earth. Frikkie stopped the Land Cruiser suddenly, and Bob, like poetry in motion, was at full draw and released just as we came to a complete stop. But these animals are so quick, that like the previous one, it jumped the arrow as well.
Spined and trying to crawl away, our PH held it down while Bob administered the coup de grace with his large knife. We turned around and headed back to the main camp where Esak spent his morning skinning and gutting. We drove out to the blind and tried once more for the elusive warthog.

Unfortunately, the goddess Diana was not with us. We baked in the hot sun for over three hours and nary a hog in sight. The wind was swirling and the warthogs would have no part of it. Bob would not collect a trophy on this trip, and there wasn’t a thing we could do about it. Frikkie saw the hopelessness of our situation, and suggested we head back to his camp as he had a nice kudu for Bob to take. So back in the truck we went. Gathering up Esak, we made a mad dash back to our lodgings.

Frikkie’s approach on this bull kudu would be a little different than some of our previous hunts. He yelled for Alfred to jump in the old Land Cruiser with Esak, and before long we were headed in two vehicles to what looked like a shell hole caused by a howitzer. They immediately went to work running strands of wire and cutting branches from the trees. In under 30 minutes it was beautifully camouflaged. Our PH had been watching this herd carefully, and unknown to us, had determined that the waterhole a few feet away from this crater was their preferred choice. We waited in this hole for a very long time. It finally got to the point where Bob could barely see the pins on his bow. Frikkie gave us the high sign that it was time to call it quits. We needed no encouragement for it had been a very long day.
Our last meal at Frikkie’s consisted of escargot, followed by steaks, fries, wine, beer and cognac. It was a fitting culinary conclusion to what had been some of the best food I’d ever had outside of the United States. More good news followed, as Natasha heard on the radio that the airline strike was settled, so that sword of Damocles was behind us. And then, almost as though it were ordained, the power went out again and we were forced to converse by candlelight. It was time to “square up” with Frikkie, so Bob and I began to go through the numbers. We gave Esak, Alfred, and Lillian, a full month’s pay. Bob then gave Frikkie a very generous bonus as well. There were no complaints; as a matter of fact Frikkie thought it was very generous.

We had an early wake-up call coming. The ride to the airport was about five hours and Frikkie wanted us packed up and in his full-size van by 6 AM. The entire family was coming as they were going to take Little Frikkie to the dentist and then stay with some friends in Johannesburg. Since we had been in the bush for 15 days both Bob and I wanted to stop somewhere to buy some souvenirs.
Frikkie knew the best open-air market in the city, and so, on his advice, we stopped there before going to the airport.

No sooner had we parked the van when it was surrounded by a group of blacks shouting in Afrikaans. I didn’t know what to think, and they were puzzled when I didn’t respond. The gist of the matter was, they were all vying to see who got to wash Frikkie’s van. For the sum of one U.S. dollar two lucky guys get to wash the entire vehicle. We made our way into the bazaar which is like going to an open football stadium, but where the vendors are located both on the field and in the vomitory. Our PH steered us to a friend of his, who spoke excellent English and had all kinds of trinkets and oddities to sell. After purchasing some wooden animals, masks, wildebeest tails, etc. we made our way to a sparkling clean Volkswagen van. They had even pulled the windshield wipers up, so the blades would not leave a mark on the glass.

On we drove to the airport, a mere 20 minutes from the open-air market. Frikkie parked and the entire family exited the van, as they wanted to escort us to our gate. As we approached the main doors Bob pointed to a sign, and then tugged my sleeve. The sign leading to the main entry of the airport said; “Enter At Your Own Risk.” It was a foreboding omen of things to come. As the door opened we found ourselves in a sea of people and madness.

The reports of the strike having been settled were in error. No one had moved in or out of that airport for over 10 days. We got in a line with thousands of other people and hoped that somehow we were going to get out of there. Frikkie was stunned by the chaos.

“Call me on my cell phone if you can’t get out of here,” Frikkie said loudly. “We can put you up with our friends if need be.”

It was a pretty emotional good-bye when we shook Frikkie’s large hands. Bob and I both stumbled for words to express our gratitude in showing us the time, and the hunt, of our lives. I walked up to Natasha and thanked her for her many kindnesses these past two weeks. I offered my pinky finger to little Xanthe who immediately took hold of it.

“Our paths may never cross again Xanthe, but I know you will grow up to be as beautiful as your mother,” I said over the ever rising
volume of noise and confusion. And with that, they departed. No sooner did we lose sight of them than Bob and I began another adventure that would test our patience and stamina.

Safari Club contributor Terry Weiland had a piece in a recent issue of their news magazine that dealt with the outlandish delays travelers, especially those with guns, experienced due to the airline strike in July. Well I’m telling you first hand it was a disaster. You meet the most interesting people when you stand in a line. Sometimes they are fascinating, and other times you hope their plane crashes. The folks ahead of us were from California. The strike began the day they arrived. Their luggage was lost. Their firearms were lost. They ended up at their camp for three days in the same clothes. On the fourth day of a ten-day safari their guns arrived. The luggage came as well, but someone had broken into every piece and all of their cameras, both digital and 35mm, and their optics, were stolen. Despite the setbacks they had a wonderful “that’s life” attitude. Then there were four college students from Wheaton (Illinois) who had just spent 14 days teaching rural blacks how to build latrines. They had lived in the most primitive of conditions, bathing from buckets hung from trees. These are the people who can bring hope to a continent that is forever beset with trouble. And then there was the jerk from Missouri. An arrogant, obnoxious, s.o.b. who, although he had hunted plains game with a rifle, looked with contempt on Bob’s photo of his arrowed lion. Talk about the ugly American.

We had been in line for four hours when I decided to take a stroll just to get some blood flowing in my legs. While Bob guarded the luggage I walked about and struck up a conversation with a fine gentleman from Australia. He had a precious piece of information. There were no flights, no planes and no flight crews. We were just wasting precious time as the hotels in Jo-burg began to fill up. He pointed me to a very kind Delta agent who corroborated the facts. “Get out of here and get a room while you can,” he told me. We called Frikkie’s cell phone five times but there was no answer.

Bob and I calculated that after four hours in line, we had moved five feet! We left the airport and found our way to a shuttle bus to take us to a Holiday Inn. While standing there we met an older woman from New Zealand. She informed us that she had been stranded for seven days. During the course of our conversation,
Bob, beaming, showed her the picture of his lion. She was with “Earth Watch,” she told us, and gave him the same look as the moron from Missouri had. It just seemed like no one wanted to see Bob’s lion. Thirty minutes later we were in the lobby of our hotel. Just like the places we had stayed in with Frikkie, this one had a very high wall with concertina wire at the top. We had lucked out as the concierge told us there were only four rooms left. I tried to convert some U.S. currency, but the hotel had run out of money!

Once settled into our lodgings, we made our way down to the pub, where a very kind bartender converted our dollars into rand. Guinness was cheap and tasty. After a few pints we made our way to the restaurant, as it is too dangerous to venture out onto the streets of Johannesburg. As a matter of fact, a recent Associated Press article points out that 51 people are killed daily. To borrow a quote from that same article: “Eleven years after the advent of multiracial democracy, South Africa remains one of the world’s most crime ridden societies...”

As we walked into the restaurant, there on the wall was one of the specials. It was billed as the “Minnesota Burger.” I pointed and laughed, and one of the servers asked me what was so funny. When I told him that I live there, he replied; “What’s a Minnesota?” We enjoyed a very nice meal and with a few bottles of red wine we were at least letting the tension slip away from us a bit. Out of the blue, our waiter informed us that the striking flight attendants and the South African Airlines management team were in the next room slugging it out. Things looked good, he told us.

We watched an action thriller on the television in our room, and called it a night. We were going to hit it early even though our flight did not leave until 7 PM the next day. Exhausted by the long wait in line, we both awoke refreshed, and headed down for breakfast. By the time we finished it was 8 AM. I had a strange feeling that we had to get out of there despite the fact the flight did not leave for 11 hours.

“Bob, we’ve got to go, and go now.”

“You know, I think you are right, it can’t hurt.”
So we paid the bill, gathered our gear, and got on the shuttle. Two security officers, armed with sub-machineguns, walked through the bus and randomly asked to see passports. Why we were not asked to produce ours is a mystery to me. Pandemonium reigned at the airport. We found the line for South African Air, and you guessed it, there were eight people already ahead of us. We stood there from 8:30 until 1:30 when they finally opened the lane and announced they would only take the first 10 people. We lucked out, but only partially. Originally we were to go to Sal Island, then on to Atlanta. From there Bob would go to Houston, and I would continue to Minneapolis.

“I can guarantee you a flight out of here if you are willing to fly into Senegal, and then on to New York. Otherwise it is a 50-50 chance of making the Atlanta flight. What do you gentleman want to do?” asked the ticket agent. Without hesitation we both said “New York.”

Well, we got past that hurdle, but now we went to another area where they had to inspect Bob’s bow and arrow. Being the first one in sped it up, but I can only imagine the delays as the flow of passengers became tidal. Once cleared, we headed into the lounge. It was packed with weary and aggravated people. We invited a young American student to join us, as she looked a little lonesome. We stayed in that bar for 3 1/2 hours. We made our way to the gate only to be told that the flight was going to be delayed for yet another hour, but that we had to stand there or risk losing our seats. At 8:05 PM, almost twelve hours since we entered the airport, they began to board the plane. I was not convinced we’d ever get out of there until we were in the air. Every single seat was sold, and it was another hour before the aircraft pulled away from the gate. Finally, we were going home.

I described in an earlier installment of this series the trials and tribulations of extended flight, and there is no need to cover that territory again. After 10 hours of flying we landed in Dakar, Senegal to pick up passengers. About 30 people deplaned and we were ordered to grab everything that was stowed in the overheads or kept beneath the seat ahead of us and place it in our laps. A group of about 8 security officers then searched every vacated seat on the plane. Once they were satisfied, our new passengers joined us. These were mostly Senegalese, and as a flight attendant told me, they don’t like bathing much. I know this is politically incorrect, but
what happened next is true. We were told to cover our mouths and close our eyes. The flight crew then went down the long aisles and sprayed an air freshener/disinfectant.

Six hours into the flight put me in a position in which I had to use the restroom. It was late at night and as I walked towards the facility I thought I saw the door close. I paused debating what to do next as the “Occupied” light never came on. An Aussie suddenly showed up behind me, and he told me to “get going Yank.”

“I think there’s a lady in there, buddy.”

“Not a chance mate, get going.”

So I opened the door, and sure enough there was a half naked Senegalese woman, who screamed, and then slammed the door in my face. I’m not sure what the penalty is in that country for seeing a naked woman that is not your wife. But it is probably safe to assume that you will have your eyes gouged out with an old rusty spoon. I said “g–day mate” to the Aussie, and made my way to another restroom located at the rear of the plane.

We landed in New York City at 7 AM on Sunday morning, July 31. JFK was deserted. It was here that Bob and I parted ways. I couldn’t thank him enough and he knew it. I got lucky, found an empty line and was boarded for a direct flight to Minneapolis. The rest was easy. Bob made it to the ticket counter where he had four choices as to which flight he would like. How could he go wrong? He took the next available one, and as the plane began to back out from the gate the engine stalled. He sat there for five hours as crews tried to discover the problem. By 11 PM that night he landed in Houston, exhausted beyond description.

EPILOGUE

Six weeks after we had returned, Frikkie sent Bob an email. His cousin, Driese, offered 15 trackers one month’s salary if they could find the Cape buffalo who had taken the arrow that fateful day. Try as they might, the animal was never found. Although the measurements are not completed yet, there is a good chance that
Bob’s lion will place number ten in the world with a bow. I wish that guy from Missouri would read this.

It is close to six months since I have returned from Africa. I have traveled to other parts of the world, but none have had the impact on my psyche that the Republic of South Africa has. Each day of my life, some little episode, or a fragment of a conversation with one of the many characters we met, pops into my mind. Oftentimes I find myself laughing out loud to the bewilderment of my small daughters. When my feet ache I think of Esak and the wildebeest. When I am grilling, the wood smoke reminds me of Frikkie and his unforgettable fries. While cleaning my Colt 1911 .45 ACP a few weeks ago, Driese popped into my mind. Cholly’s “Big Six” are still in transit, so I will have that to look forward to soon. Of course I want to go back. Who wouldn’t? But that is highly unlikely. So, I will pick up where I left off, and continue to read as many books and stories about the Dark Continent that I can. Already I have eight tomes on my reading stand just waiting to be devoured. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ll never be able to shake the many memories of this adventure from my mind. I’m very happy about that, because I don’t want to ever forget.