

Rhinos Don't Need A Reason

A Rhino
Will Try To Kill You
Just Because You're There.



By Peter Hathaway Capstick

The towering Zambian sun is hot, yet the shadows are refreshingly cool in the low humidity of the July winter as you walk slowly behind Silent, the grass swishing softly against your bare legs. Ahead, in easy reach, bounces the buttstock of the Evans 470 Nitro Express double rifle, carried by the barrels over Silent's shoulder. The worn pink rubber of the recoil pad seems somehow an insane choice for a masterpiece of Circassian walnut and soft scrolling. You wonder idly if there was an overrun years back on soles for Pat Boone's white bucks that found its way to London. From time to time, you flick a small, leafy branch at the old man's back to shoo the tsetse flies that light, and feel the same fluttering motion as invisible clears your shoulders of the sneaky, little blood suckers. You have long gotten used to the whine of the stingless mopane bees

mobbing your face to drink the moisture of your sweat. A glance at the next dung pile of the spoor shows the buffalo herd is only a half-hour ahead, and you know that at this hot time of the day they won't be moving fast. Any minute now you should spot the tail of the herd and pick out a fat, young bull for staff rations.

No word or sign is necessary. As the thought crosses your mind, Silent is already passing the rifle and dropping back. You need not follow the track any longer; visual contact is imminent. Considering the size of the herd, you decide to swap the 500-grain solid bullet in the right barrel for a soft-point to minimize the chance of the big slug passing through your target animal and wounding another beyond him. You'll keep the cupro-nickel-jacketed solid in the left barrel just in case a rear raking shot is called for or a charge

must be stopped. Another pair of solids are between the fingers of your left hand where they always are, so familiar that you have eaten an entire sandwich without realizing that they were still stuck there.

Let's see, now, you pull out the little binoculars from the breast pocket of your department-issue tunic and start scanning the dense tangles of bush ahead. Nothing yet. The wind's fine though, medium and steady into your face as you move quietly off to the right to clear a dense stand of dry, shade-haunted *tsanti* grass. After another 200 yards and many pauses to glass ahead, at last the whip of a tail is telegraphed through the dusty lenses and other patches of dark, sparsely-bristled hide stand out through the few gaps in the cover. They're about a hundred yards off, feeding slowly along in a low, reddish haze like ground fog, raised by hundreds of

hooves against the dry earth. Leaving your men where they are, you begin to slip forward, stalking the herd, looking for a likely candidate for the Big Surprise. At 40 yards, you edge up to a big tree and look the lot over again. Lord, but there's a slather of them! Some hulking, scarred bulls with worn horn-tips and heavy corrugated helmets of boss are off to one side, unusual as they are not often found with the women and kids. Cows, some with calves at heel, are scattered all about and — oh, yes — there you are. A trio of 1200-pounders begins to wander by at an angle right across your front, only 30 yards away. You ease the Evans up and into a careful rest over your thumb while your hand presses steadily into the side of the tree. It's as solid as a bench rest, a perfect set-up for a nice, neat spine shot that will drop him instantly so he won't get the adrenalin up and make next week's dinners taste like cutlets carved from a boiled, steel-belted radial. The blackened fine head of the foresight nestles into the shallow wedge of the rear as you start your squeeze on a spot a third of the way down from the top of his shoulder. But you never complete it. . .

A chorus of warning yells erupts from behind you, and at the same instant, the buffalo herd explodes into panicked stampede, only a few animals to be seen through the choking pallor of dust and churning dirt. Confused, you swing around, so startled that your first reaction is anger. Not for long. Among the dashing, yelling men, a dark rushing form appears, the weird *chuff-chuff* of a furious rhino loud even over the thunder of the running buffalo.

Bloody hell! A thunderbolt of panic tears through you as you watch helplessly, the rhino closing on Invisible as if he is standing still. Headed right at you, the man's body shields the rhino until, just as he realizes he is about to be caught, he throws himself off to one side. With unbelievable grace for his three tons of muscle, the bull hauls up with the delicacy of a polo pony, reverses direction and is on Invisible before he can roll away. It all seems to happen in slow motion, the lowering of the great, spiked head, a burst of dirt and leaves and the awful sight of Invisible with his arms wrapped around the rhino's head and face as tightly as he can hang on.

With the African still clutching the animal for dear life, the rhino snorts and starts to run off. With as careful aim as a quick shot permits, you slam the soft-point into the center of the shoulder, the .470 blowing a puff of dried dirt from the heavy skin. A torrent of blood erupts from the bull's nostrils as he tosses, and Invisible arches through the air to land in a tangled heap 25 feet away. While he is still airborne, you stick the second bullet into the juncture of neck and body. The

rhino collapses as if electrocuted. Reloading, you shoot him again and reach Invisible just as Silent does. Covered with blood and lying on his face, anguish and despair swirl through you as he is cautiously rolled over. Incredibly, there is no horn hole, the blood mostly that of the rhino which soaked Invisible when the lung shot probably also caught a big artery.

A far more literary type than you once observed that true happiness is the sudden, unexpected cessation of unbearable pain. Maybe. Whatever, it isn't far from your relief on seeing that faithful old companion's eyes open and come into focus. Gasping for breath, he lies for a few minutes, feeling for broken bones, and then climbs painfully to his feet. Both you and Silent are half-hysterical that he is unhurt, let alone still alive, and the mood changes to lunatic good humor. Silent reminds him that he, Invisible, owes him money. You threaten to run him in for attempted rhino poaching and suggest that if he plans to take it up as a profession, he'd better quit trying to catch them with his bare hands.

Over cigarettes and water, you listen to Invisible describe his feelings as the big bull trundled over and stuck his front horn into the dirt six inches in front of the man's stomach. By reflex, he could think of nothing else to do but grab it and hang on to keep from being gored. Certainly, if he hadn't, he would have gotten a very impressive new navel. As the relieved laughter and joking died down and smokes were re-lit, I could see Silent and Invisible glancing back and forth at each other. Something was afoot, for sure.

"Nyalubwe," ventured Silent in Fanagalo, calling me by my African name,

"what do you suppose happened to that *bejone* over there that he is dead?" I looked at him, puzzled, as they both made the classic African gesture of surprised amusement by covering their mouths with their hands.

When I didn't answer, Invisible picked it up. "What *bejone* is that, Silent?" he innocently asked, looking around. "Ahhh. I see it now! Let us go and look, then come and advise Nyalubwe of the wounds."

They rose and walked carefully around the carcass, hands behind their backs, frowning in concentration. Walking back over to me, Silent rested his chin in his hand with great seriousness.

"Tigari, Bwana," he said sagely. "It must have been black magic. Or maybe lightning. There is no mark of arrow or spear upon him, and we have both most carefully inspected him."

"Bwana," chimed in Invisible, "might it not have been too much time with his wives? It is that time of year. Too much time spent with women can kill a man. Why not a rhino? Yes, I believe it was that."

Finally, it dawned on me what they were trying to do. In Zambia, the killing of a rhino even in self-defense is a very serious offense, the perpetrator of which is usually presumed to be guilty until, rarely, proven innocent. They were trying to protect me from the prosecution I probably would have received if I was still a professional hunter working for the safari company instead of a game control officer. Being a bit hazy on the logic of such mysterious workings as those of the game department, they were offering to back me up in a false report that the rhino had been found dead and not shot by me. I could

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Photo by Leonard Lee Rice

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have explained to them that it was no problem, but then they would have been cheated out of their gesture of loyalty, a loss of face even between such good friends as we.

"Hmmm," I pondered out loud. "It may be that you elders are right. In any case, let us cut out the interior filets and all the better meat we can carry as well as the horns for the government. We shall drink a little beer at camp to give us strength and speak more of this matter before I send the paper-that-speaks along with the horns."

With sly grins, they set to work with their hatchets and knives, certain they had saved me from a fate worse than sobriety. Back at camp, I sent the horns off to headquarters along with my report, telling the truth of the incident. After all, I was the chap in charge of the area, and if I called it self-defense, who was to say me nay? I was and still am certain that had I not killed the rhino, he would have gotten Invisible. As it was, nothing less than a miracle was responsible for his survival despite my somewhat late action.

Zambia is one of the last great strongholds of the black rhino, by far the most dangerous of the two African species, although his cousin, the white rhino is a good deal bigger. Neither is black or white, the difference chiefly is mouth structure, the white rhino being a grazer and the black a browser with a prehensile lip. Although quite substantial numbers of black rhino live in the *miombo* tree scrub of the Luangwa Valley, the safari company that controlled the shooting concessions there was permitted only five rhinos per year for its clients, and those at extremely high license fees. So, because of the substantial foreign exchange each animal represented, woe to any poor white hunter forced to kill a rhino in self-defense or for any other conceivable reason off license. Thus, in the old safari days, our

Willingness of a rhino to charge just about anybody or anything, is due to three factors: poor eyesight, great curiosity

and a fabulously advanced state of stupidity. As was typical of the case of the bull who tried to place Invisible *en brochette* just in the name of good, clean fun, we had done nothing to try to bother him; good gravy, we didn't even know he was there! When we moved crosswind, stalking the buffalo, our scent blew into that patch of grass we had swerved to avoid. Old *bejane* caught it and just came boiling out for some jollies. The next one might have run for his life in the other direction. With all dangerous big game, you never know. With the rhino, I doubt even he knows.

I owe my phenomenal skill at steep-chase running and tree climbing largely to the black rhino. With typical modesty, I advise you that I have twice won the Central African Invitational as well as having accumulated case-lots of loving cups for Advanced Rhino Avoidance and Active Applied Cowardice (Rhino Division). I am, to be further candid, something of a legend in my own time. My fame for attracting angry rhinos the way a nudist colony draws mosquitos is still spoken of throughout Africa in hushed, reverent whispers. I never knew what it was; maybe just bad breath or the heartbreak of psoriasis, but if you were to line up a hundred people and turn loose one irate rhino (as if there was any other kind), I would lay you very good odds that he would pick Very Sincerely Yours as his target. I have probably spent more time swaying in treetops than the average baboon and have certainly run as many miles trying to cut the wind on angry rhinos who just suspected I was around as I have chasing poachers. Where rhinos are concerned, there's just *something* about me, and I doubt it's my winning smile. Yet, to show you how much I deserve all those awards, over the years I only once actually had to kill a rhino, the bull that day with Invisible. But, sometimes it was very, very close.

One of the weirdest things to do with rhino happened to a pal of mine, a fellow professional hunter, back when I was doing sport safaris with clients. It seemed pretty funny later, known as "the day when Jack got bagged" but was no joke at the time. He was out with a single client on "fly" camp, following elephant spoor with a couple of his men and a pair of light tents. As he tells it, dawn was just coming up, and he was about to crawl out of his sleeping bag. All of a sudden things got a bit confused as a rhino took some sort of dislike to his tent and charged it. Of course, the horns snarled in the canvas and ropes, and the *bejane* took off through the bush, blinded by the cloth which now acted as a huge sack containing my friend. He took one hell of a battering over the 150 yards the rhino dragged him but luckily was not stepped on or gored. Maybe the sleeping bag cushioned some of

the concussion of being slammed against trees and anthills, but not much. When the rhino finally shed the tent and pranced off, Jack looked like he'd fallen into an active, empty cement mixer.

My own hairy occasions with rhinos have sometimes required a good deal of bluff, not a tactic which leaves one with any particular feeling of security as the odds are dead even that the rhino isn't bluffing. As a rule of thumb, provided that the individual circumstances of the confrontation make such a move practical, the best way to avoid trouble — besides staying home — is to climb a tree or otherwise put yourself out of reach. I do not recommend fragile trees. At close quarters, this likely won't be possible and an attempt to run when a rhino is clearly bearing down carries a high instance of fatality.

Like all the big stuff, rhino are amazingly fast and, despite the writings of some, are nearly impossible to dodge for any length of time. Many weathering tombstones will bear me out on this. Given a direct charge over reasonably open terrain (not forgetting that prayer couldn't *hurt*) a good shout and clapping and waving of the hands may turn a rhino. It may also make him charge faster now that he can see your motion more clearly. I have broken many charges with a shot into the ground between the forefoot or, failing that, a bullet into the horn. It doesn't always work but normally will cause an unwounded rhino to turn. Oddly, unlike buffalo and many elephants, rhino are fairly easily turned. This, in my personal observation, places them at the bottom of the list of traditional dangerous big game, although they do kill a lot of people who, understandably, would not share my views.

It is among the saddest of African facts of life, or death, that the rhino is on the way out. Not to extinction; there are still far and away enough in reserves to preclude that fate. But, despite the huge injections of money created by sport hunters' license fees and other mind-boggling taxes in those countries smart enough to realize that game can pay its own way and that controlled safari operations represent the highest and best use of immense tracts of rural Africa, unrelenting habitat destruction and poaching makes me think the day isn't all that far off when you will not have the worry of several tons of hard-nosed, Pleistocene leftover bearing down on you like an overweight nightmare. When that day comes, I hope I'm hunting over the hill. When the bloody cattle take over and the turf is raped by the plough; when the ancient figs are sliced into plywood, when the tribesmen are all Sanforized and have color television, I'd rather be with the rhino. But, for the moment, I think I'll just keep climbing. ■