

Tricks behind the scenes

by Anthony Dyer

Charges by large and angry animals is what the film public expects to see in African adventure films. It is not always easy for the professional hunters running these great safaris to make the necessary arrangements! First they have to find an animal willing to be a film star and then they have to get the large and cumbersome film crew into position to be able to film the action at the first take. There are very few second chances to get the animal to go back and start all over again!

When filming a rhino charge for "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" we took the side panels off two of the hunting cars and mounted big Mitchell 35mm cameras. It was a very satisfying sound to hear those two cameras already running as the cars swung into position and the engines stopped. Those two cameramen had years of experience and did not miss their opportunities.

Cameramen were not always so lucky. On one sad occasion a camera crew was standing by a pride of lion that had a dead buffalo floating, just out of reach, in the Aruba dam. Finally one brave lion could no longer resist this free meal. He moved back a bit, took a run, and leapt over the water onto the floating buffalo. The buffalo started to roll in the water and the lion fell off and swam back to the shore. This was all wonderful except for the sad fact that the camera jammed as the lion started his run!

Once when I was tape recording at night I heard through my earphones a leopard make his magnificent sawing call right by my microphone. At the same moment I heard the rattling sound of the end of the magnetic tape running off the reel. Of course I fitted a new tape and went on recording for hours - but he never called again. On another occasion we were making sound recordings of elephant at the water hole below Mudanda Rock in the great Tsavo Park of Kenya. There was very little sound until an aluminum foil envelope that had contained a spool of magnetic recording tape was carried away by the wind. I followed its flight with despairing eyes, for apart from littering the park, there was a good chance that it would frighten all the elephant away. The unexpected result was dramatic. The envelope spiraled down amongst the elephant and caused an incredible reaction of trumpeting and screaming and in this case the recorder was ready. We got the finest lot of elephant calls possible and the aluminum envelope was not to be seen anywhere. Maybe an elephant carried it off as an interesting souvenir.



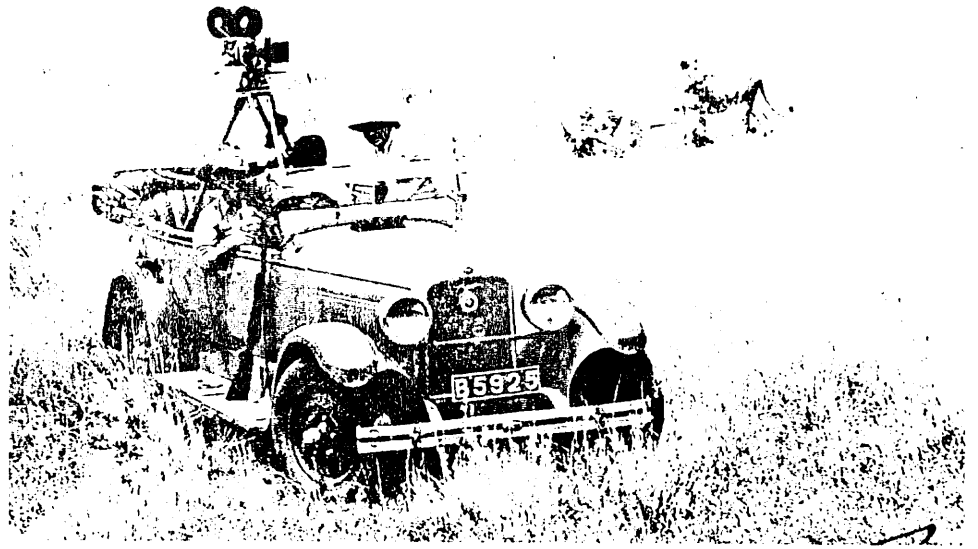
A film crew asked me to stage a fight between a man and a leopard. This is rather like asking for the poor actor to jump into a nest of wild chain saws with hooks on their blades. Anyway I was being paid to produce the goods so I had to come up with a plan. This was 48 years ago and the conditions then were more relaxed than they are these days. We had a fine tame cheetah in our camp and he and the actor were only

too happy to wrestle in front of the cameras, while well screened by bush and with all the necessary lighting and filters to simulate a night effect. Then I got hold of a wild old leopard that had been trapped on a neighboring farm. It was potentially dangerous because it had a broken canine tooth - and if released again it would certainly become a dog killer and probably even a man killer. So I was allowed to shoot it and we promptly filmed our actor wrestling with the limp carcass. The results were realistic and successful to the extent that the film premiere was a Royal Command performance.

Fritz Schindelar was an early victim of too risky movie stunts. He was tragically killed in 1914 while filming a horse-back lion hunt on the Athi plains.



In one of the "King Solomon's Mines" films an animal stampede was required. I was fortunate not to be involved in this film because stampedes are impossible to film. I have never succeeded. When I saw that film I was delighted to see that they too had had a difficult time with the stampede. It had been filmed in California and I easily identified a GOAT jumping wildly over the camera. I guess I have a critical eye for these things. They did have a magnificent scene of a rubber dummy of a man being tossed aloft by an elephant. I wonder how they got that shot? Later on the rubber dummy was used to great good effect by a well know "Lothario" to ingratiate himself into the favors of a young lady. He somehow got the dummy, which was dark hued, into the lady's bed. When she came to go to bed she



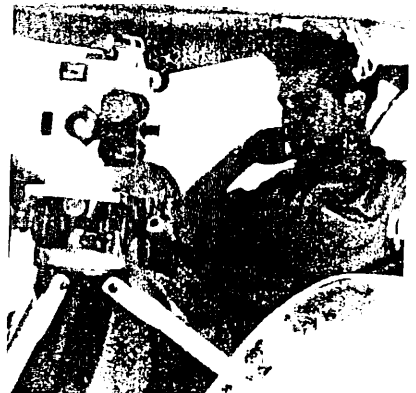
Charles Cottar and sons. filming lions in the Masai Mara. Charles was later killed by a rhino.



The author holding the slate for a film of the American Museum of Natural History in 1950. Note the microphone on a long Sisal pole.

saw this strange figure there and screamed for help. Our hero had posted himself conveniently nearby and rushed to her help. He picked the poor dummy up and hurled it over his head, through the door, and it bounced down the corridor. This was too much for the young lady who promptly fainted into his ready and eager arms.

On the "Snows of Kilimanjaro" I was required to have vultures sitting in the trees around the camp. This was easy except that for some reason I absolutely failed to get a vulture anywhere near our film-set camp. Vultures in scores came to the dead wildebeests that I provided for them but they would not perch in the trees near our dying hero's tent. The film script



was quite specific on this subject and I was getting into deep trouble as time went by and expenses built up. I solved the problem quite simply by cutting plywood silhouettes of vultures and nailing them to the branches. It is said that the camera never lies and this is quite true - but it can certainly fool most people.

Long ago I saw a film showing the shooting of a crocodile. My suspicions were aroused when I saw the crocodile coming across the river towards the camera. Its tail did not seem to be moving. Then my suspicion noticed that there was a fine wire attached to the crocodile's nose. This wire was pulling it across the river for a really close view of a live wild croc. A close view alright - but the croc was dead.

Now back to charges. Elephant charges were the most difficult and I never succeeded to get a good one for the cine cameras. I had several magnificent charges but the camera-men were not in the mood to stick around and film them. Nor was I! In one spectacular charge we were on foot and ran away as hard and as fast as we could. At the very last moment I turned around from a flat out run and shot the poor old brute. He was close beyond all belief and I am lucky to be writing these words. It turned out later that he had already killed three of the local tribeswomen as they went for water. Sadly there was no film to document this fine charge. A great waste.

Another charge was brief and to the point. It was so brief that the cameraman failed to film it. He was somewhat upset by the fact that I drove into a tree and we came to a noisy and sudden stop with the elephant towering over the car. The elephant was equally upset by the sudden stop and backed off. That was a second fine charge wasted.



The Cottars running for their lives. Filming elephant charges was suicidly dangerous.

had to have a slate and clapboard and a cable link up. Now there is night vision equipment and video film so sensitive that one can take good film after the sun has set during those wondrous minutes of twilight.

There is another great advantage to the video tape cameras. One can keep the camera running virtually for as long as it takes to get the shot. In the old days one was constantly worried about getting to the end of a reel of film. The quicker one tried to reload the more one fumbled and swore as wonderful shots were lost to posterity. Now one

The third charge that missed being filmed was lost for reasons of prudence and common sense. My client had decided he was bored just with the filming of a herd of cow and calf elephant. I too became bored by his attitude and moved the car around to a position where we were upwind of the herd. This was bad judgement on my part for a tr chased us for about a mile. There was some damage done to the car and the clients camera mount was smashed by the bush we smashed through. The one blessing that came from that adventure was that the client did not admit to being bored ever again.

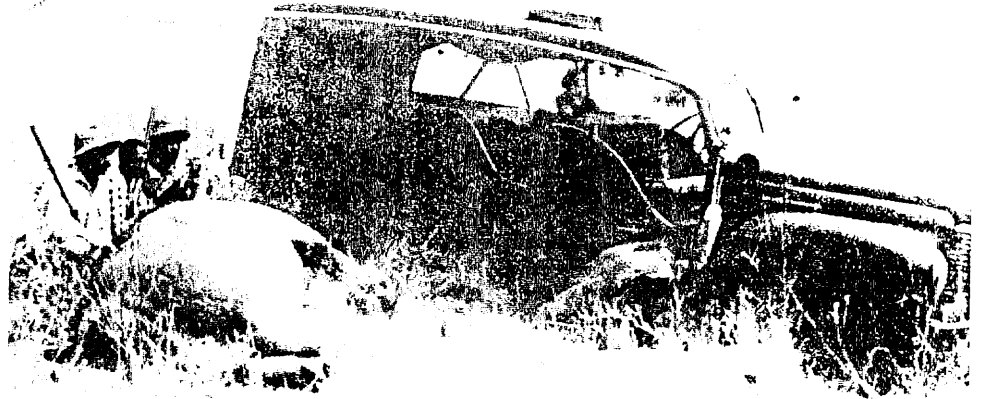
How the equipment has changed. On a safari in 1952 our sound recording machine with its power supply weighted about a hundred and fifty kilos. Today the same equipment weighs about five kilos and has a radio link to synchronize it to the camera. In the old days we

„Snows of Kilimanjaro“, hundrets of vultures on the ground but none in the trees!



can just keep the camera running and be perfectly placed to get the action. There is another great fringe benefit to video recorders. When one plays back one is regaled with a concert of bird song that one had never noticed while engrossed with what one saw through the viewfinder.

Over the years wild animals in the many fine national parks and reserves and sanctuaries of Africa have become habituated to motor vehicles and one can view them and film them in a manner that was previously unknown. I have learnt more while watching minutes of the many fine elephant films than I learnt in years of hunting the great beasts. The next development that lies ahead of us is to learn how to interpret and translate the low frequency rumbles with which elephants communicate. The basic facts of this form of communication have already been demonstrated. It is probable that we may learn how to communicate. This will pose us all with huge problems of conscience when we have to tell them that the populations of Zimbabwe and Botswana will have to be reduced by



Two rhinos charged the car. The horn of one pierced the side just above the author's leg and bent the steering wheel. Both were killed by a gunbearer in the back.

many thousands. It is said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. I now fear that a lot of knowledge may prove to be an even more dangerous thing.

This essay started off as a set of remi-

niscences about the tricks of the trade of filming animals in Africa. It is ending up as a philosophical discourse - but you must please bear with me for it is all part of my long and interesting learning curve.

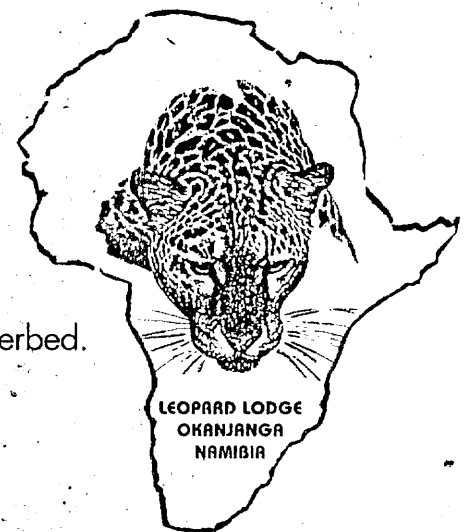
Afrika - Tip:

LEOPARD LODGE

We can offer a scenic African landscape without inner fences stocked with a high game population as well as a lot of leisure activities for the non-hunter like tennis and swimming pool.

Enjoy your sundowner at the pool bar and watch the animals in the riverbed. All rooms are built of natural stone and offer luxury accommodation.

- exclusive hunting rights on 400,000 acres
- 25 different species including elephant available
- Leopard Lodge itself is free of Malaria and situated just 45 min. from Windhoek Int. Airport
- children under the age of 12 in company of their parents stay free of charge



OKANJANGA N° 54
 POSTBOX 90049
 KLEIN-WINDHOEK
 WINDHOEK 9000
 NAMIBIA / AFRIKA
 TEL: 264 - 615 - 40 409
 FAX: 264 - 615 - 40 444