

Old Africa

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Ox Wagon Lolgorian 1923

Stories from East Africa's past



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I Lassoed Rhinos with a Rope

Told by Lu Wedd

1959 On my return from training in the UK my uncle Ken Randall offered me a job catching rhino. I jumped at the chance. Randall had a rhino camp at Kibwezi. Young rhino were exported and sold to zoos.

I'd always loved the bush and I remember



I am wearing the checked shirt with goggles, pulling a rhino close to the catching truck

as a three-year-old being on safari in about 1942 surrounded by hanging rows of biltong. My dad was away at war and my mum ran the farm at Rumuruti, but we had no money. We'd gone out shooting game to make into biltong to feed the many POWs in Kenya, mainly Italians from Ethiopia. We even had some working on our farm. The biltong was also supplied to the troops stationed in the area.

Tom Carr-Hartley was my uncle and I grew up with his sons Pat, Brian, Roy and Mike. I got involved in game catching at an early age, going on safari with the Carr-Hartleys. I lost my father soon after the war. He committed suicide after coming back from a vicious war in Burma and couldn't face the stress of the farm and our lack of

finances. So I'd join the Carr-Hartley family on safaris whenever I wasn't at school. As we became older the four Carr-Hartley boys and I trapped animals on our own, mostly zebra and giraffe and later rhino.

I left Duke of York School and had six months before going on to college in the UK. I spent that time with my uncle Ken Randall in Nanyuki catching animals. When I came back to Kenya after college, Randall offered me a job at his Kibwezi camp. In addition to catching rhino for zoos, he was also paid to translocate adult rhinos from Kibwezi to Tsavo National Park. Then we went to Meru at Giyaki where we caught rhino and moved them to what would become Meru National Park.

Once I was working on the back of the catching truck when we caught a black rhino. We lassoed rhino using a rope on a long bamboo pole. We stood on top of the catching truck as the driver drove next to the stampeding animal. We had reeled this rhino next to the truck when it jabbed up with its horn. It caught me on the side of my knee, leaving a nasty gash. Thankfully it didn't catch me full behind the knee or it might have swept me off the back of the truck and left me at the rhino's mercy.

After that we went to Embu and the Tana River and moved adult rhinos from area for the building of Masinga Dam. We took those rhinos to Meru and also to Nairobi National Park. I had my photo published in the *Standard* newspaper at the time releasing a rhino into Nairobi National Park.

In 1960 we moved operations to Uganda. First we worked outside Queen Elizabeth National Park. We tried to catch hippos, but the grass was just too long. There were so many the authorities were about to start culling. We wanted to catch some to sell to pay for the white rhino translocation we were about



Back at the stockade we used rollers to lower the rhino to the ground.

to embark on. But we were not successful and we'd almost decided the only answer was to cull them when the warden called. He told us to sneak into the park at night and catch them in the dark. We had some exciting moments. We had four cars and two jeeps, a catching truck (an ex-Army 15 cwt) and a lorry to carry the captured animals. One night we surrounded a baby hippo with the vehicles. The mother hippo charged into the melee. It brushed by the jeep I was in and hit the next jeep and tipped it over. The mother escaped through the gap it had created. But we caught about 20 hippos in that operation.

Then we went north of Butiaba near Murchison Falls National Park to catch young elephants. We caught about 15 for zoos. Later Tony Seth-Smith, Ian Parker, the Carr-Hartleys and others were called in to shoot thousands in a culling operation.

After catching elephants, we went to West Nile to catch white rhino and move them to Murchison Falls National Park. No one had caught fully grown white rhinos before. We travelled through Murchison over the ferry at Pakwach to Arua, then back to Obangi on the Nile. We set up camp on a small tributary of the Nile. First we built rhino stockades big and strong enough to hold three-ton rhinos.

Our catching team consisted of my uncle Ken Randall, Pat O'Connell, also an uncle, myself and Ken Stewart, a trapper who had his own small operation and added an extra vehicle. We also had a great African crew who had come with us from Kenya. Maguru acted as the headman, with Ndirangu and Lagushin, a Turkana with a crooked arm. It had been broken and set crooked. It was his right arm and he kept it in a leather thong. He'd see a rhino and shout, "Obaya" and



A baby rhino gets used to the stockade as Pat O'Connell lifts his feet.



I am holding the rope as the rhino bashes at the truck door.

would point, but his bent arm always pointed in a different direction from the animal.

After about the third or fourth day, a Land Rover pitched up with two British gentlemen. We wore shorts and safari boots, but these guys showed up in stiff white shirts and flannels. They were part of a film crew from Anglia Television led by Colin Willock. It took them a day to get organised. Then we took them for an evening drive on the catching truck. We were about 60 kilometres south of Sudan. Ken Randall swerved into the bush. The two Brits were surprised at the speed he drove through an area with no road. John Buxton, the cameraman, asked if he was supposed to film in the bush at these speeds. Pat O'Connell, Ken Randall's partner, said, "We haven't started yet."

On the third morning the local trappers were leisurely having tea as we waited to go catching rhinos. The film crew could not understand the lack of urgency. Then a tracker came in with the news, "The rhinos are over the stream!" Within two minutes we were ready to go. Within five minutes we found the rhino in a burnt-out clearing surrounded by long grass. We lassoed the rhino and she ran out a long length of rope.

Collin Willock stuck his head up out of the hatch of the truck to get a better view. Randall shouted at him, "Get down!" Willock ducked down just before the rope scythed over the roof of the vehicle. It could have decapitated him. The rhino then charged at Colin's side of the truck, which had no door. As it crashed into the side of the vehicle, Colin leapt on top of Ken in the driver's seat. Ken had to shove him back. Slowly we reeled the rhino in.

We had two sturdy poles attached to the side of the catching truck. Once we caught a rhino, we wrapped the rope around the poles in a figure-eight pattern and reeled the rhino in. When it came close enough, we'd jump out and tie the rhino's back legs. We'd release the head rope and push the rhino over



We stood on top of the catching truck as the driver drove next to the stampeding rhinos.

on its side before tying its front legs. We had to dig a ramp and then reverse the big carrying truck down the slope and pull the rhino up on rollers using a winch pulled by the catching truck. Later we'd unload it by manpower and release it into the boma or stockade. When we had about eight rhinos, we loaded the truck with a mother and baby and released them into Murchison National Park and came back for the others. The rhinos lived in their new home until about fifteen years later when Idi Amin's troops shot them all with army weapons. One mother died of colic and her calf went on to live at Paraa with the name Obongi.

After only a few days, Colin Willock had had enough of camp life and went away, leaving his cameraman to finish the filming. Willock later produced a TV show on catching the white rhinos for Anglia TV called "SOS Rhino."

During my time catching animals with my uncle and his team, I became engaged to marry Carol Ball. I wrote a thrilling letter home to Carol telling how elephants had surrounded us in a muddy area. Carol's dad said, "You're not marrying him unless he gives up that dangerous job!" He helped me get a job at East African Airways as an engineer on the Comets. Later we moved to Kericho where I worked in the tea industry until I retired.

But even though I left the animal-catching business, I still had a few more chances after I was married to go with the Carr-Hartleys on catching trips. Carol and I and a party from Kericho joined the Carr-Hartleys in the Serengeti about 1966. It had rained and trackers were in front of the vehicle following spoor carefully. I jumped off and started running down the tracks ahead of the trackers. Brian and Pat jumped out and followed. I bent down to go under a tunnel of wait-a-bit thorns and saw a rhino's backside six feet in front of me! I stopped and called, "Rhino!" Brian pushed Pat to one side where the rhino ran

past him. Brian ran for and climbed up the only tree in the area. There was no room for two so I ran for the truck with the rhino chuffing in close pursuit. I leapt on to the truck just as the rhino crashed into the side. The rhino went on to push the door in. Our friend Frances Monck-Mason was behind the door and he was so frightened he left the next day.

Carol watched the whole chase from another truck and says the only thing she could think at the time was, "Is he going to make it?"

Another time in the mid-1960s, we went on a holiday at the coast and camped at the Carr-Hartleys. Brian, Mike and Roy were going to catch elephant at Galoli on the Tana River near Garsen. They asked if I'd come along and help rope. We had two vehicles and one roper. I agreed if I could take my camera. I had never filmed any of our earlier roping expeditions. That trip was very scary. We weren't shooting, even though we had a gun. The mother elephants would come right up to the Land Cruisers. One man smacked an elephant on the head with a *debe* to push her away from the vehicle. Another time someone had to hit a mother elephant with a coil of ropes to keep her away. The mothers came within an arm's length of the Land Cruisers. I have a framed photo I took of one of the mothers chasing us. We had a puncture while another mother chased us. Mike's vehicle cut off the



This elephant mother charged us as we attempted to capture young elephants.

elephant so we could fix the puncture.

Some years later I bought a used Land Cruiser from the Carr-Hartleys. They'd used it as a rhino catching car. I entered this car for eight Rhino Charges before deciding the vehicle and I were getting too old, so now I help run control points at the charge instead. While my career, spanning over 50 years, has been in engineering, I have always had a yearning for the bush and wildlife. With any opportunity I am happy to go off into the bush and the Rhino Charge has given me a chance to do that.