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*The parakeet game ranger
from Zululand
- J.V. Clark*

CHAPTER 19

The barefoot game ranger from Zululand – J.V. Clark

Introduction

Sitting at ground level only meters from the huge rhinoceros bull and only water separating us, his presence filled me with a premonition that this animal was my reason for being here on the Umfolozi Game Reserve at that time frame. Even now as I write this paragraph, I know that the Creator of this universe designed this animal to last out all these centuries as an opportunity to test our willingness to be stewards of His creation.

I remembered also that although rhinoceroses were protected at the time, the species was still not out of danger. This small pocket of 500-odd individuals could suffer losses from drought and then of course should they continue to breed too well, a lack of habitat would mean overgrazing and, worse still, they would spread out into tribal lands and white farms. Coming from an education at Weston Agricultural College, where we could chase cattle through a race into a dipping tank, I could not picture in my mind doing this with this impressive creature to capture it. That we would have to work out some method was obvious, though this was still a mystery at that point in time.

Now at this late stage in my life I have come to realise that what made those days so wonderful is precisely that group of very special and exceptional personalities I came into contact with during Operation Rhino. I thank the Lord for placing me on Umfolozi at that particular time, and to experience the freedom of those many days alone.

Just walking in His creation, “Communion with Nature” I called it then. So much so that I admit that this was why I did sometimes lose sight of the people I was interacting with. I was good at what I was doing and did not mind telling people that. The dignitaries who came to witness our successes, all reinforced this by telling us how good we were. We were international news and what we were developing was of cardinal importance to the conservation world. Operation Rhino was a huge first in the recovery of an animal that was on the endangered list. We laid a cornerstone in what is now known as Game Ranching.

The experimental years

Thanks to a meeting between Colonel Vincent, the Director, and a well-known veterinary scientist, Dr A.M. Harthoorn, at an international congress in Poland, the solution was offered. Dr. Harthoorn had been engaged in experimental capture with a veterinary colleague, Dr. Hal Buchner, in Kenya and Uganda using a dart gun and various drugs to capture antelope. They had achieved considerable success, but a suitable drug for a 2000 lb rhinoceros posed a big question mark. The only way a rhinoceros had been captured up until then had been by methods used by trappers in East Africa. The rhinoceros were chased by a 4x4 vehicle and

then roped. Ken Randall and others, like Willie de Beer, had done this successfully. Colonel Vincent invited Dr. Harthoorn to South Africa to experiment with drugs in the capture of the white rhinoceros. Various drugs were tried, including succinylcholine chloride and gallamine triethiodide.

My first rhinoceros caught with M99

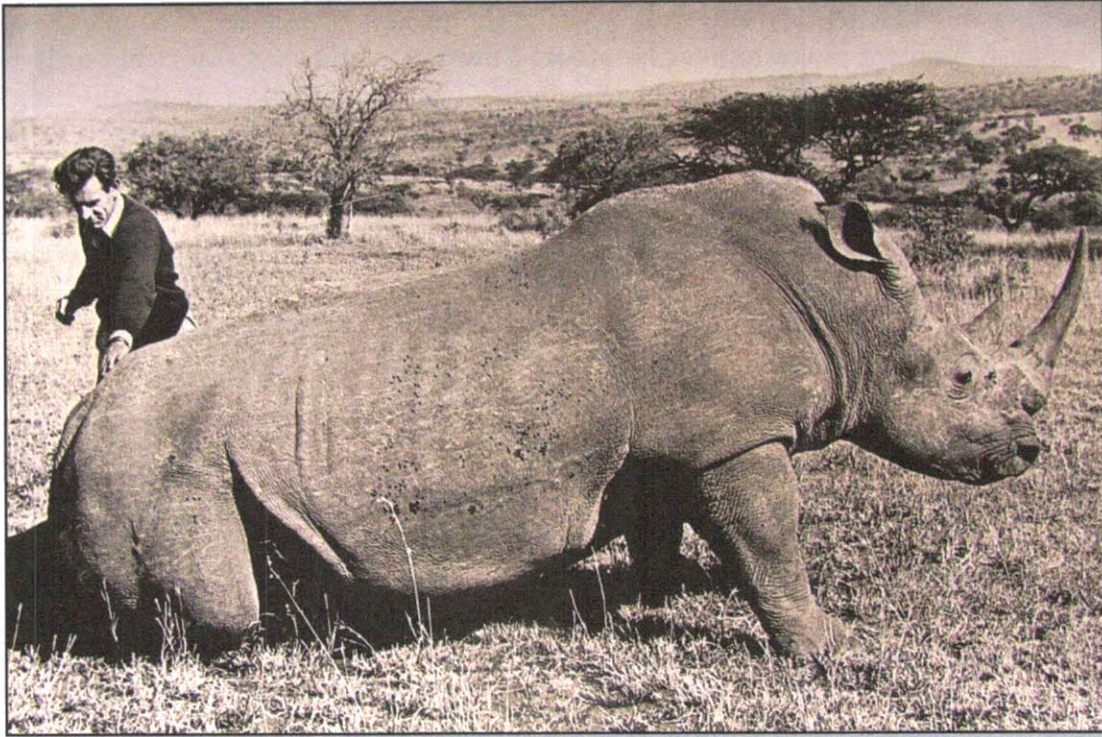
I experimented with M99 on an adult bull in the Maqwetshaneni area, far away from where tourist was allowed to go. The reason for this was in memory of earlier experiments when all did not go as planned. We know by now, a full grown rhinoceros bull weighs round about 2500 kilograms, so with a little mental arithmetic, I came to a dose of 12.5 milligrams of M99. Instead of 12.5, I put only 10 milligrams in the dart and I selected a really big bull. It was a great feeling to be able to dart from three times the distance, using a 5 ml dart.

The dart hit him smack in the middle of his neck and he started trotting off. Within two minutes he was sitting on his hindquarters like some big puppy dog and I could hear his heart thumping away, from quite a distance! I raced some Lethidrone into his ear, while I waited for a reaction and I placed two tags in each ear. If he recovered I wanted to be able to keep tabs on him for a week or two. To cut the story a little, I needed to give him several more injections of Lethidrone before I felt he was out of danger and was breathing more relaxed and I could not hear his heart thumping.

With my heart rate a little more normal I remember sitting on a nearby anthill and slowly filling and lighting up my pipe to steady my nerves. From darting to the rhinoceros lying and sleeping peacefully was no more than 10 minutes! What I was used to was 20 minutes before first reaction and then a further 20 to 30 minutes before the rhinoceros was immobilized. No wonder I had felt that the difference was like a Ferrari to a bicycle. Never before had I been required to move so fast. Actually this experience had one advantage; it gave me an indication of what a safety margin I had with M99. All you had to do was be awake and administer Lethidrone in time.

This overdosing led me to re-think as to what the real dose was. Since I did not want to now underdose, I decided to the M99 in the next dart. I left the first bull sleeping in a very natural position with one of my staff to look after him. I did not want another bull to come and take advantage of his drugged state. The next bull was darted with only five milligrams of M99. The M99 was dissolved in sterile water and I was not used to mixing a dart with so little liquid, this increased my respect for this drug, it was a weird feeling to expect half a cubic centimeter of water to immobilize a full grown rhinoceros. The M99 was dissolved at a strength of 19 mg/ml.

Even the next rhinoceros I darted surprised me with the speed it put the animal down. It was sleeping peacefully in three minutes! I was pleasantly surprised, now the rhinoceros was less stressed not having run for a long distance. It did not mean that I could stop using horses, I was lucky with these two animals. Rhinoceroses could still cover a lot of territory in the five minutes the drug took to react when I had stabilized on a dose of three milligrams per adult.



John Clark the barefoot ranger from Zululand

Cleaning out Tribal Lands

At last the boundary dispute had been settled and the rhinoceros-proof fence was rapidly moving from Mhlosheni eastwards. At last we were accomplishing more than just a political gesture and I could start in earnest to remove rhinoceroses from the Biyela Tribal lands. John Tinley and I had removed some white rhinoceroses and sent them to the Kruger National Park. Previously this had been more of a political gesture than a serious attempt to depopulate the area. All we were achieving was to create a vacuum to be filled by rhinoceroses from across the White Umfolozi. Now we could also start removing the population of black rhinoceroses from the areas that fell outside of the game reserve. This group of animals found themselves in the position of being fenced out of the reserve and into the tribal lands. Here they were increasingly unpopular, chasing the cattle herders and agricultural department workers who were attempting to fence off lands designated as arable fields.

My system was to dart three white rhinoceroses and load them onto the Kruger National Park trucks. If we were fortunate enough to complete this operation early, I would go after a black rhinoceros to transport to Ndumu. We were darting once a week for the Kruger National Park's team. I cannot recall how many this area produced, but my guess is that over 50 white rhinoceroses were cropped in the Ntambanana/Biyela countryside.

In this part of the Ntambanana area was a stretch of very dense thorn bush. Here were mixed up every known *Acacia*, *Euphorbia* and assorted thorny scrub imaginable. No prices for guessing where the black rhinoceroses lived? I think that it was in this situation that I really appreciated the ability to run through the veld barefoot. To go into what we called "heart failure" bush, required patience and stealth and a whole lot of good old-fashioned luck.

Try walking in thick thorn veld, first with boots on and then walk through the same area barefoot. You are much quieter barefoot. I must also add that you could only walk on clearly defined, well-used paths in this bush. There are not normally thorns on a rhinoceros path. Also, I am convinced that game has learnt that a certain sound is a person walking in boots, a sound quite unlike that of any animal they are used to. Some of the black rhinoceroses darted there, were darted from a distance of only two to four meters. Any farther away or you could not see them, or there would be too many branches in the way.

My drug accident

What happened to me was less dramatic. John Tinley and I were darting in the Ntambanana district, after white rhinoceroses for the Kruger National Park trucks. As usual I was riding with three made-up darts, one loaded in the gun and holding one on each side of the stock. We came up behind a group of four rhinoceroses in ideal, fairly open terrain. The first two darts flew perfectly and we swung off after the third. I fired a fraction too soon and instead of hitting the back leg square on, the dart hit high up on the rump and bounced up. Now the muscles there tend to operate independently of this thick skin, with the result that the dart flipped out and the drug sprayed back into my face. I could feel and taste the liquid landing inside my open mouth.

Planting my feet on the dashboard, John did not hesitate but drove past the rhinoceros and towards Empangeni hospital, Moses Xulu, my truck driver, was given a bottle of Lethidrone and a syringe. I asked him if he felt he could load the two rhinoceroses. By now Moses had been present at the capture and loading of over 200 rhinoceroses so he answered that he was sure that he could manage. By now I was incapable of moving or talking, so could offer no advice. John then peeled off and the wind in my face kept me oxygenated on the journey to Empangeni. Graham Root, who had also been on the back of the Land Rover, was feeling a little dizzy, but not immobilized, so to be on the safe side he got admitted together with me. My favourite doctor, Dr. Anthony, took over and when he heard from John that no Lethidrone had been administered, he decided that the dose I had received was not life-threatening. All he prescribed was the occasional whiff of oxygen and he told the nurses to keep me awake and not let me sleep! Where my accident differed from Ken's was that I had received a dose of hyoscine and some tranquillizer, enough to dilate the pupils of my eyes. Unfortunately I was placed in a bed where the sun shone straight into my eyes. Now I could not tell this to the nurse that very obediently slapped my face every time I closed my eyes to protect them from the sun.

At long last Dr. Anthony came to check up on me. He saw what was happening and realised that the sun was bothering me. Then they pulled a curtain over the window, but more importantly I was allowed to sleep it off. When I woke up in the middle of that night, I had a lot of quiet time to lie and think about the whole experience. The first real thought that came to mind was almost like a flashback. It was if I was standing next to Dr. Tony Haarthoorn and his words came to me.

“John, always have consideration for the animal you are dealing with.”

I then woke up to the fact that every rhinoceros I dealt with was aware of what was happening to it. A sobering thought! I made a promise to myself that thereafter I would cover the eyes of the rhinoceros to protect it from what I experienced while under the influence of M99. If I found the sun in my eyes uncomfortable, the same went for every mammal I placed in this unnatural position. The next sobering thought was, was this why some animals became fighters? Were they handled unceremoniously or worse, were they mishandled? Sometimes in haste they could be subjected to unfair treatment or just plain indifference, get this job over and done with, type of attitude.

The shock of realizing that I had drugged myself and that I would possibly not survive was uppermost in my mind on the way to the hospital. This tension gradually left me as I came to realise that the dose I had received was not life-threatening. Much against my will I was kept there for three days, "under observation" as Dr. Anthony called it. Lying there in hospital I had plenty of time to analyze the whole experience and came to the conclusion that anything that happens to one can be turned to the good. If you just step back and think about it and are prepared to look at the good as well as the bad.

Rhinoceroses for the Kruger National Park

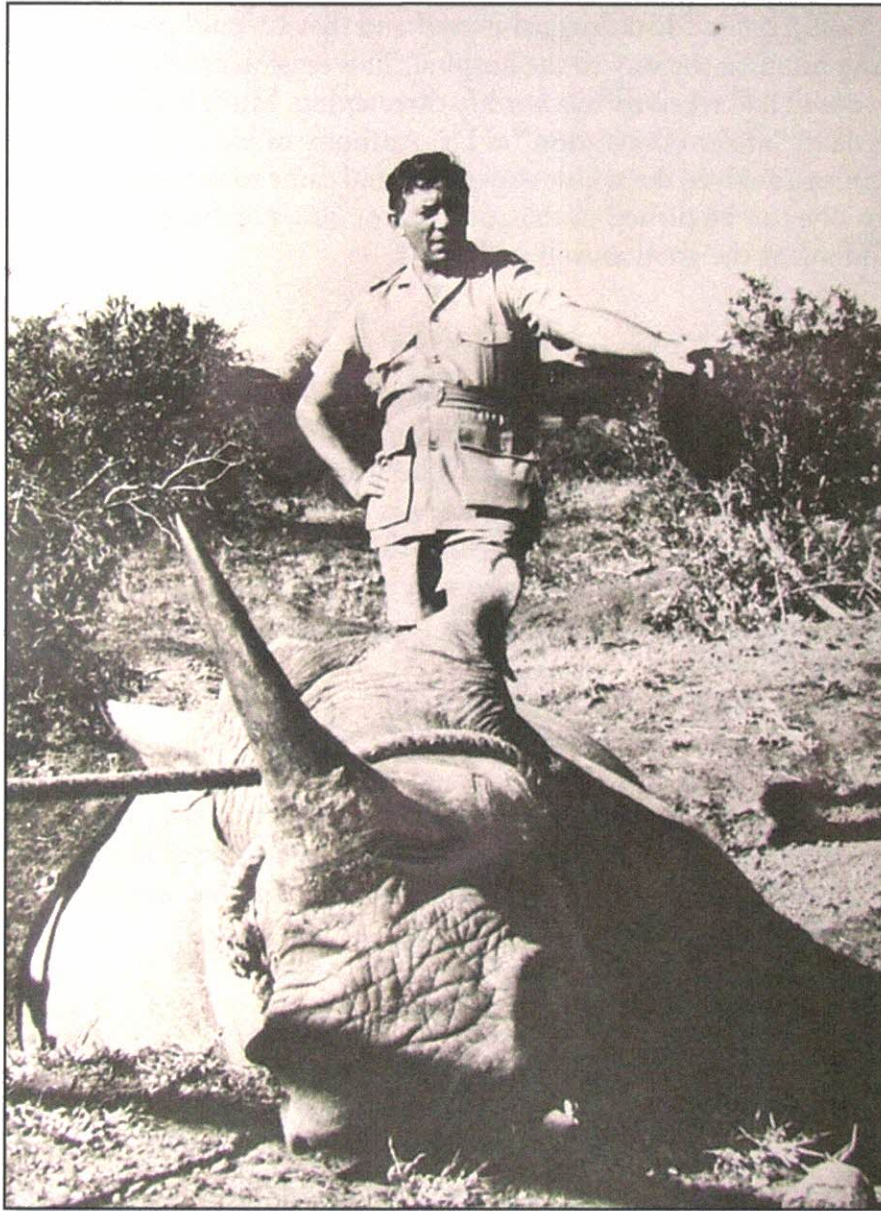
The problem of transporting rhinoceroses shows that there was a total lack of breathing space. I was sure that our problems with Amber were going to mask the fact that rhinoceroses straight from the bush, was the way to go. The very much published move of the first rhinoceros to restock the Kruger National Park was at hand. This time the plan was to catch two young bulls and two heifers and pen them in the bomas. They needed to all drive in one convoy. The need to drive four trucks in convoy put paid to my idea of straight from the bush. At that time no way could we catch four rhinoceroses in one day.

So Ian Player decided that we would catch one rhinoceros a day, deliver them to the boma, re-crate them, load them on four trucks and release them together in a specially fenced-off area on the Kruger National Park. Catching and loading and unloading at the pens went a little better than with Amber. We were now using John Kymdel's tipper, the one used to deposit road material on the tourist roads. Poles under the front of the crate and again my Land Rover as the power to pull the two rope blocks together and shortly thereafter unload the still drugged rhinoceros into the pen. One down, three to go.

Loading for Kruger National Park

Then came the great day! I was by now looking forward to a break in the constant battle to repair, in crisis mode. I needed empty pens to repair them properly. Four trucks rolled into the boma area and off-loaded four crates onto the ramps in front of the gates. Early the next morning the peace and quiet went out the window when a gang of Zulus rocked up and we started a tug-of-war with each rhinoceros in turn. The rope was threaded through a hole in the front of the crate and the rhinoceros roped with a "vangstok" (catching pole holding a rope lasso). It was brutal and I stood afterwards thinking that there must be some other way to accomplish the loading. The rhinoceroses were fighting the crates as the trucks pulled away. I feared we would lose animals if we did not improve on our methods.

Almost prophetic thoughts. I was not part of the team that went to the Kruger National Park, but they told me afterwards that the rhinoceroses did everything but climb out of the crates. At one point one rhinoceros was stuck upside down in its crate, and Ian feared they would arrive, one short of the promised four. They eventually all arrived there, albeit in a sorry state and were released into a large paddock. The Press were out in full force. These rhinoceroses were the forerunners of many more to come, the first for many years since being shot out. We were returning rhinoceroses to this section of Africa after having been absent for many years.



Dr Ian Player the leader of Operation Rhino

Pretoria Zoo with Ntandana

When the two orphans were nearly yearlings I transported them to the Natal Parks Board head offices at Queen Elizabeth Park, Pietermaritzburg. Here they were on view for some time. Ntandana ended up in the Pretoria Zoo and Ncinta went to an overseas zoo. I went to see Ntandana some three years later to find out how he was doing. I could not believe the reception I got. When he was small and his molar teeth started erupting, I used to put my hand in his mouth and rub his gums. He found it very soothing and this continued on as a welcoming sign between us.

Now at the Zoo I went with Grobbie, the keeper, to the back of his night house to where only the keepers are allowed. When I spoke to Ntandana, in Zulu like I always had; the response was immediate. His ears came forward and he came to the bars, stuck his head through and opened his mouth. Rather stupidly I put my hand in and started rubbing his gums. It is just as well that rhinoceroses have neither canine nor incisor teeth, only molars. Ntandana closed his mouth on my hand and pulled me into his pen, through the bars, which were fortunately designed to allow free access to humans. The patrons at the zoo were treated to the sight of a rhinoceros herding his, at the time, favourite human friend. It took me three and a half hours to get away from him. He most certainly recognizes me and tried his best not to be parted from me again.

The end

I am now 70+ years old and spared by my Creator to still be able to remember most of what occurred in the years between 1959 and 1974. Obviously, some of the facts have lost somewhat in accuracy, for which you, as the reader, I hope will forgive me. In my early adult life I never really thought or paid much attention to the spiritual side of life, but my complete emotional involvement with Nature and ecology led me to realise that this Creation required a Creator, and this led me to Christianity. As a committed Christian I have come to realise that life is not just circumstance controlled, but there is a controlling factor. I realise that it was His way to make me aware that He has walked with me through my life, preparing me for this time that I now spend in recording this narrative.

Time and again I have been criticized for using drugs that were harmful, but what people have lost sight of, is the fact that we could only use what was available, and modern drugs were introduced as and when they came on the market. *In spite of that I only lost one animal out 400 darted, due to drug-related problems.* The most important factor is that our methods and drug combinations impacted on the whole package of wildlife management. We did the spade work. We provided the basic tools for those who have followed us. They are only improving on our successes. We built the foundation and now all who follow are building what is visible today, a multi-million rand business.