**Lions and a Saddle**

**By: Mark Paxton**

**This has been adapted from an official report while I was a Nature Conservation Officer for the Central Area stationed at Halali, Etosha National Park. (1982- 1987)**

During my time of over five years as a Game Ranger (Nature Conservation Officer) stationed in Halali from early 1982, I covered the entire Central Section which I was in control of, on horse-back. In addition I also covered the adjoining areas of the Namutoni and Okaukuejo areas from my horse-camps built on the boundaries. I operated from these strategically situated horse-camps built near the intersections of each of the fire-breaks which cris-crossed the Park. My patrols from these horse-camps involved 3-15 hours in the saddle and followed a strict pattern of Cloverleaf, 360 degree and diagonal routes designed to cover each fire-block as effectively as possible. Being young, bullet-proof and bubbling over with principals and enthusiasm, I was still under the impression that good Game Rangers actually get into their areas either on foot or by any other less intrusive means other than a vehicle to be able to understand the Park and the management techniques required to run it. I was also very fortunate to have a Senior Nature Conservation Officer – Trygve Cooper, who thought the same way and not only supported but encouraged my activities, and sometimes over-zealous ideas.

After over three years later and when my area had been completely covered, I still had the urge (or stupidity) to punish my back muscles, leg tendons and arse more on the back of a horse riding through one of the most prestigious and dynamic Parks this country has to offer.

During June/July 1985, I then decided to cover the Etosha Pan’s edge on horse-back from Namutoni to Okaukuejo. The entire trip was to last 8 days and entailed 85 hours on horse-back with daily rides averaging a little over 10 hours. The idea was to assess each of the many water points along the Pan’s edge, many of which were mere seepages and often brackish and unmapped or unknown, other than by the very few older Heikum Bushmen still alive.

This ambitious journey originated from Halali to Namutni and return to Halali, with the second leg then to Okaukuejo and again returning to Halali. The horses therefore were required to carry all overnight sleeping gear, food and equipment and for this reason the saddles were fitted with saddle bags. I made use of fenced off horse camps and Game Capture bomas along the route to ensure the safety of the horses from Lions and other predators at night.

To complicate things further I had acquired a third horse, a pretty little mare, by somewhat unorthodox and essentially unofficial and illegal means from the SADF & Sons operating in the Northern regions of South West Africa. Being an additional drain on our already almost non-existent budget, I was grudgingly only allowed to keep this third horse only if I logged enough legitimate riding hours to justify her stabling needs. I therefore had to find a rider for her, and this was where the Tourist Officers at the Halali Tourist Office fitted in nicely. Over the years I had very little trouble talking these guys, frustrated with constant office work and Tourist issues, into enduring several back-breaking and arse-blistering hours on horse patrol with me.

On the western section of the journey to Okaukuejo and back to Halali I enlisted the help of the Shop-keeper Peter Adrian to ride “Red Star” the little mare, while the weathered “Whiskey” was ridden by Jonas Tsumis and I as usual rode my strawberry roan “Naughty Boy”. As usual both Jonas and myself were armed with a side-arm and a shotgun respectively. On our return trip from Okaukuejo we had some excitement worth a mention.

The night at Okaukuejo we camped at the fence enclosed stables with the horses while enduring the drone of the camp generator. The cold and crisp July weather and the strange new noises made for a restless night soothed only by the occasional wailing screech of the Jackals. Our already saddle weary bodies after two full days ride were sore in areas we had not imagined could get sore, and we slept fitfully.

The following morning started with some minor dental surgery. This involved a capped front tooth, which had come loose some weeks ago and was now beginning to become an embarrassment when it popped out in mid-conversation and usually when I smiled, or had to be fished out of the coffee cup several times a day. A chance meeting with Dr. Hu Berry the evening before convinced me to visit his “dental practice” at the petrol station very early in the morning to avoid tourist traffic interference. This was the only source of compressed air and therefore critical to the operation. My mouth was blown out and cleared of all forms of bacteria and the cap thoroughly cleaned before being secured by some mystical glue ferreted out of Hu’s lion-darting kit. Once my cheeks and tonsils had re-adjusted to the air-blasting and I could finally use my blow-dried tongue to speak I felt like a new man with a smile on my face. That cap lasted me another ten years and eventually had to be surgically removed. God alone knows what that glue was, but it probably had nuclear qualities and definitely needed to be patented.

Now with a well-secured smile our little troop sallied forth on the return journey to Halali. The trip started off relatively uneventfully until opposite the “Circular Drive” turnoff a little way from Okaukuejo while heading towards the edge of the pan.

I first spotted two lionesses on a raised grass hummock on a ridge on the edge of the pan from some distance away taking advantage of the first warm sun. They had not yet seen us and the horses too were unaware of their presence. Through binoculars I found there was a very young cub with this pair, which further complicated the issue, and I decided to skirt around the group going inland away from the Pan’s edge. Slowly walking the horse we tried to circle widely around the group of lions also putting a mixed group of Springbuck and Gemsbok between us and the Lions, which by now were very much aware of us. The Gemsbok wisely decided not to play along with us and spooked as we topped the same ridge the Lions were on at a slow trot. With the slight rise in height and improved visibility, I now also saw the small group of Lions was in fact a much larger and structured pride which included a magnificent male and three very young cubs with additional lionesses, one of which had a radio collar. We were now almost past the group and slowed to a walk taking in the magnificent spectacle in the early morning sun. One of the lionesses however, decided to change the peaceful scene with a determined charge at us, forcing us all to increase our pace to a gallop for a short distance to avoid her attentions. She stopped her charge and we gathered ourselves some 500 metres from the pride now behind us. Exhilerated by the experience and with heightened senses we were about to carry on when Peter, riding behind me, noticed that my revolver had fallen from the holster on my belt. Now unarmed, this was a problem which needed to be rectified, and I told him and Jonas to stay where they were in a wide open plains with excellent visibility while I decided to head back along our tracks to recover my side-arm. The now very much alert Lions thought this was an invitation to a re-match and stood with ears pricked up waiting for me to get within charging distance. I was not very successful in my search with my eyes more on the lions than the ground and much to the disappointment of the Lions I decided to abort the fire-arm recovery attempt and turned back to Jonas and Peter. At this point the mare Red Star, decided she had had enough time standing around, promptly dislodged Peter with ease and galloped straight back towards me and Naughty Boy. Her fully laden saddle now riderless and loosened had started slipping under her belly causing her to frantically kick at the hindrance while at full gallop. Her route to us however deviated slightly and took her straight to the Lions, now thoroughly alert seeing breakfast galloping towards them. They immediately went into ambush mode with four Lionesses loping off into position to cut off the terror-stricken and wildly kicking mare. I had no option but to charge the mare in an effort to change her course to certain destruction. Absolutely panic-stricken and blind to anything but the remnants of the saddle on her belly she was not to be deterred and actually collided with us almost dislodging me as well. The Lionesses were by now running to cut her off and I had no option but to chase after her and get between her and the Lionesses. With no protective firearm I had only my voice, fuelled by desperation and rage I charged at each of the confused cats waving my hands and screaming a stringfull of well-chosen obscenities involving their bloodline, ancestry and threats of what I would do to them if they harmed a hair on my pretty little mare. I fear I may have mentioned Hu Berry’s name in vain on a few occasions too. I thankfully managed to confuse all the lionesses and the mare was now galloping full tilt into the wide open Pan leaving the embarrassed and bewildered Lion pride behind. Here I eventually caught up with her, getting hold of her reins to bring her to a frothy halt. Jonas on Whiskey now finally awake then joined me and we tied up what remained of the saddle while soothing the snorting horse. Naughty Boy was dripping sweat and I had adrenilin seeping out of every pore on my body. We looked back towards the Pan’s edge to see the entire pride of Lions gathered on the ridge in the stunning morning light looking out towards us and I swear I could see the old male salute. Wearily we trudged back to where we had left Peter to find that being now mount-less, unarmed but unharmed and alone in Lion country, he had walked about 2kms back to the closest tourist road where he had picked up a lift back to Halali with a passing tourist.

Fearing the unenviable task of written reports in “fiflicate” to account for the lost or damaged saddle and equipment, we tried to recover what we could of the pieces of the saddle and Peter’s luggage which were strew all over the plains. The Lions again now started gathering themselves for round three and one had already stationed herself on the pile of gathered equipment while a third had taken possession of the larger portion of the saddle while we had been looking for the rest. I was now completely bullet proof, pumped up with Adrenilin, full of spit and vinegar and severely enraged by these brazen lions who clearly had no respect for Government property. So, still unarmed, I on Naughty Boy charged these two lionesses with arms flailing while screeching obscenities in an effort to dislodge them from their prizes. They watched my charge with twitching tails getting lower and lower behind their respective pile until I was a few meters away when I yanked Naughty Boy to a halt and doubled back with the lionesses in full pursuit. I repeated this performance half a dozen times from different angles with the same result, until I noticed the rest of the pride were now loping up to join forces and I decided to bow to defeat much to the relief of the quietly watching Jonas sitting a discrete and safe distance away on Whiskey tightly holding onto the quivering mare.

We decided to make our way out of the battle zone and on towards the overnight horse camp at a fast pace with very little time left to get to the safety of the camp before nightfall. On the way I hailed a passing tourist vehicle to ask them to deliver a message to Hu Berry at Okaukuejo that the long lost “Ondongab Pride” had been relocated and were in good spirits with details of where to find them. I also requested him to please look for the still unfound Revolver which had been the cause of this incident. Peter meanwhile had dragged his bruised and travel weary body into Halali Camp where he helped to send out my wife Charlie and one of my other Bushmen to ride Red Star the remaining distance so as not to lose valuable hours. They also recovered the saddle and all the well distributed luggage and my faithful revolver.

Hu Berry was overjoyed at the Lion information and happy to learn that my capped tooth had remained intact throughout this experience. I was equally happy and exceptionally relieved not to have had to comb through the white Etosha Pan dust to recover a dislodged tooth of the same colour.