

A CLOSE SHAVE WITH DEATH:

THE LEOPARD HUNT THAT
ALMOST ENDED IN TRAGEDY

BY STEVE LAWRENCE TORS

Steve Tors was born in California, USA, in the 1950s. His father, Ivan Tors, was a famous film producer, with *Flipper* and *Daktari* being two of his most popular series. As a young boy, Steve participated in his father's ventures. Ivan Tors and Jan Oelofse became acquainted while Jan was working on the film, *Hatari*, in Hollywood. Steve later came to Namibia, where he and Jan worked together on a movie at Okonjati Game Reserve. He was never to leave Namibia. He became a PH, acquired his big-game license and has been with Jan Oelofse Hunting Safaris for over 40 years now. His knowledge and experience of everything concerning hunting and the industry is unsurpassed.

The background of the page is a photograph of a sunset over a savanna. The sky is a gradient of colors from deep orange near the horizon to a pale, hazy blue at the top. Silhouettes of various trees and bushes are scattered across the lower half of the image, their dark forms contrasting against the bright, glowing sky. The overall mood is serene and atmospheric.

The blood-red sun was rising over the horizon. However, that was not the only blood red colour we would find that morning ...

The Landcruiser braked sharply as the driver spotted a drag mark across the road. It was the break the hunting team was looking for. This was after searching and failing for eight days to make any contact with the big male leopard in the area. This was the best sign they had had so far.

The hunting team consisted of Thinus Botha, one of Southern Africa's premier hounds' men, Naftalie Amwoolongo, Jan Oelofse Hunting Safaris' professional hunter, Louis, a Portuguese client, and Witness, Thinus's main hounds' man. They had a quick discussion and decided to follow the drag mark very quietly. Maybe they could get close to the leopard without spooking him, and get a shot. After following the drag mark for 400 m into the bush, they spotted a big, half-eaten male nyala – but there was no sign of the leopard.

The option was either to set up a blind and wait for the leopard to come back that evening, or put the hounds down on what looked like very fresh track. They opted for the hounds, hoping they could catch the leopard not too far away, considering it had eaten a lot. When the dogs were released they immediately latched onto the fresh scent – their baying being one of the most adrenaline-inducing sounds there is to be heard in an African morning.

Following the hounds back and forth, the team moved up towards the limestone hills of the Okonjati area. The 15 km of limestone hills inside the Jan Oelofse Hunting Safaris concession is a very difficult area, much loved by leopards. There are many caves and deep vertical shafts going down into the mountain. As the team followed, the leopard went higher and higher, eventually reaching an almost vertical shaft going 20 m down into the mountain. They were able to stop the hounds from entering the shaft – something

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which the leopard could easily do. Had the dogs done so, they would never have come out of that almost vertical shaft alive. So it was decided to wait until the next morning and come back early in the hope of the dogs catching the leopard's scent and following it. With only two days left, that was the only option.

The hunters were back early the next morning. The hounds were released but they couldn't pick up the scent on the bare, sharp limestone rock. It was possible that the leopard had left the shaft quite early the previous evening and the scent was gone by the morning. The team returned to the camp, very despondent – two days left and no other sign to follow. They went back to the nyala and thought of building a blind but they were too late – numerous hyena in the area had finished off the nyala during the night.

Jan was getting desperate. The next hunters were due to arrive a week later. The leopard had been in the area for a few years and had killed numerous animals of all kinds. Jan was hoping to get a hunter to take out the leopard instead of having what could be a beautiful trophy simply shot.

A week later Julius Hagedorn, a 70-year-old civil engineer from Zurich, Switzerland, arrived for a sixteen-day hunt. His primary quarry, however, was not leopard but cheetah – which in some ways is much more difficult to hunt than a leopard. Jan asked me to talk to Julius that evening and see if he would be interested in going after the big male leopard, seeing that he had the hounds available. Julius, who had bagged a female leopard on a previous occasion, said he would be interested, as long as it was a big male leopard – which this one was, of course.

The team left the next morning but Witness stayed behind with the pack. He and I loaded the dogs and went out early, trying to pick up the leopard's tracks. We were very lucky – we had a heavy shower the previous evening until late, so fresh tracks would be easy to find. We drove to the bottom of the river and found the cat's tracks heading towards a koppie. This time it was a sandstone koppie covered by *swarthaak* and *sekelbos* – a perfect place for leopards but not humans. We radioed in and set the dogs free. Julius and Jan were having an early morning discussion about the hunt when the radio call came that the dogs were onto the leopard. Professional hunter Rudie de Klerk and Julius got into a vehicle and made for the koppie where the dogs had gone up. The other professional hunters, Naftali and Philipus, were also on hand.

By the time they got to us, we were on top of the hill. However, the dogs, having chased the leopard for about three hours by then, were blown. They were lying down, panting heavily. It was somewhat disappointing because all of a sudden everybody was there except the leopard!

After letting the dogs regroup for a while to catch their breath, we spoke to Witness and Flippie, who were the closest to the leopard. They said he was just 50 m down in some thick bush. At last the dogs were rested, so we regrouped and very cautiously started down into that thick bush. The dogs went ahead and started baying. The next thing we heard was the guttural growl of the leopard – and then, in a flash, the dogs and the leopard appeared in front of us and were gone.

We followed up but were hampered by the thick and thorny bush, and having to walk over the sandstone

boulders took a lot of time. As the dogs started baying again and the leopard was growling, we moved very cautiously into the brush. Witness was ahead and waving for us to come. He indicated that he could see the leopard and we could get a shot. There were no big trees up in the koppie, just short, stubby thorn brush, so unfortunately there was no tree that the leopard could climb, giving us an easy target.

As we were approaching, I was next to Julius with my 12-gauge, loaded with slugs. All of a sudden Witness turned and ran. As I turned and watched him run away, I heard the fierce growl of the leopard – and the next moment he was in my face, smashing into me and knocking me out for a fraction of a second. I felt as if I had been punched by a boxer. I had no idea what was going on. Suddenly I heard Julius screaming right next to me. The leopard had jumped onto him. The animal was pulling him down right at my feet. Maybe this helped because as Julius was hitting the rocky ground, the leopard, which had grabbed him from behind, had cushioned his fall.

I had the shotgun up in a flash. It was terrifying seeing the leopard's head right next to that of Julius. I had to respond extremely quickly otherwise it could have ended very badly. I thrust the shotgun barrel into the leopard's throat and pulled the trigger. The leopard was finished, immediately.

We helped Julius up. Fortunately he had no life-threatening injuries but the back of his scalp was ripped open and there was a lot of blood. I looked at my arm. It was ripped open to the bone and I had a numbness in my mouth where the medial nerve in my lower cheek had been torn. We radioed Jan and Annette back at the lodge; they had the sky wagon out and were ready for us.

We were all in a mild state of shock. We got to the bottom where Rudie was waiting for us. Julius had his camera in his pocket and I don't know who said what, but Rudie took a picture of us– and that picture is worth a thousand words!

The skin at the back of Julius's head had been pulled down in the attack and because he was on blood thinners, he was bleeding profusely. We pulled the skin back up and Rudie took off his shirt and Julius tied it around his head to stop the bleeding. "I look like Rambo," he quipped.

Back to the airstrip Jan and Annette were waiting for us. As we got out of the car, Julius fainted but luckily it was just the result of shock and the loss of blood. Thirty seconds later he was on his feet and we were in the plane, being flown to Otjiwarongo, 20 minutes away, where an ambulance was waiting for us. Julius and I were treated by two doctors. Julius had eighty stitches to put his scalp back together again, and my injured arm and the small cut to my mouth was attended to. We spent four days on antibiotic drips in the hospital.

Julius still had twelve hunting days left to go after his cheetah. Now one would think that anybody who was

70 years old and had 80 stitches in his scalp, would be on the next plane home to Zurich. However, not Julius! He stayed and hunted the cheetah for the remaining twelve days. Ignoring doctors' orders to rest up for four or five days, he went out every morning with Naftali to the cheetah tree hoping to find his quarry. This shows you what kind of a person he is. However, the cheetah never showed up.

That leopard hunt was the most exciting and one of the most critical near-death experiences I have ever had in my hunting career.

Note: Professional hunter, Eric Rundgren, who was badly mauled by a leopard in his early days in Kenya, was quoted in a book by Brian Herne, *White hunters: The Golden Age of African Safaris*. Rundgren, who had killed more dangerous game than any other professional hunter, said: "Until experienced, the speed and ferocity of a leopard attack cannot be imagined." After my close shave with the leopard, I know what he is talking about! [ASM](#)

Julius and Steve after the leopard attack

