



big game hunting

Losing Ground

So Much Effort For So Little Reward

by Keith McAlister



One of the bridges we built

If you find yourself sitting in a camp chair being eaten alive by mosquitoes and staring at the tops of your muddy boots somewhere along the White Nile with a rifle resting on your lap and a beer in your hand, and you are absolutely fatigued by a day of bridge building and road clearing, you may consider the possibility that you made some unusual choices in life. The stars are out and the rest of the camp has gone to bed but that feeling of melancholy has set in enough to start you thinking about all that life has now become or could become, and somehow the answer seems to rest in the flickering firelight.

The sounds of the wilderness are less dramatic up here in northern Uganda than places I have been further east, in Kenya and Tanzania. There are no noises from lions or hyenas, or jackals for that matter, as they have all been poached out decades ago. Only softer sounds of animals and people stirring in the quiet blackness can be heard over the crackling flames.

Having taken my ritual afternoon shower in the papyrus-walled cubical, washing off the sweat and soothing the bites from a thousand insects, I parked myself on a chair and checked some of my gear. I was back in my mucky trousers and boots, with only a clean shirt, fresh underwear and wet hair, could testify to my efforts at cleanliness. After a couple of weeks in the bush I had surrendered to the idea that I would never be really clean as long as I stayed in East Madi. And the longer I stayed the deeper the stains became on my possessions.



Landie in Zoka

The whole Professional Hunting thing is far less glamorous than you think; especially in some places. Up here in the north part of this country, along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) it is fierce.

We had to clear paths and build bridges across the many rivers feeding out of the Zoka Forest and the surrounding hillsides. This place was one of the most unsecure concessions I care to ever visit again. Bands of returning militia men poached the areas in the south and their trail of snares began to reach out into more places as their population increased and their boldness went largely unchallenged.

No one cared to mention it at the time but it would not take a genius to realise where these armed ragtag bunch had suddenly come from. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) had been slowly falling apart and disbanding in recent years and these lands were near their old raiding grounds. Adjumani was just a couple of miles away; a town which regularly fell prey to the LRA's looting and child abductions.

This is my speculation of course, but where else would so many armed militiamen and boys come from in recent years if not from the crumbling LRA? And my guess was that these soldiers could not return to regular towns and villages because they had 'blood on their hands.'

According to Joseph Koni's original concept of the LRA these men should be Acholi puritans, the chosen followers of a united tribe and people. However, as time went on his 'army' started stealing wives and 'recruits' from villages across a wide area. This being the case, the LRA soldier is hardly typical and could originate from any part of Sudan, DRC or Uganda.

They are marauders and know how to live in the bush better than most. So, East Madi has become a meat larder for these looters. That makes them a problem for anyone charged with protecting the game on this too-big-to-manage hunting concession.



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Haruna, Angelo and Komakesh are the only three men in the group who understand a word of my Swahili. Admittedly my Swahili is not great, but it goes more towards illustrating another one of Uganda's quirks. Since the days of Amin and Obote, Swahili has been discarded.

Speaking Swahili is taboo in most of Uganda, as it belongs to the darker days of Idi Amin and Obote. It was the language of soldiers, in most people's minds, and has been taken out of use since the early days of Museveni's rule, when he re-established the kingdom of Buganda and brought Luganda in as the official language across Uganda (which has actually been replaced, for the most part, by English, as the other tribes of Uganda resent the governance of this tribal language over their own, while still in need of a trade language).

When Museveni took over the country I was a young boy taking part in a journey heading towards his troops coming in from the west of the country. My family were heading back to Bunia, in then Zaire (present day DRC), when the troops advanced on Kampala, in direct violation of any agreements made between Museveni and President Obote's government, at negotiations held in Tanzania, hosted by Tanzanian President Nyerere. We were a group of five children, my mother and father, and my aunt and uncle, crammed into one Land Rover 110.

Not having enough time to cross the Nile River into Congo, we stopped in the town of Gulu towards the end of a day's driving, while it was still daylight. It was not wise to travel at night due to rebel activity. The town was full of national army vehicles so it was thought this was the most secure place to spend the night. My father and uncle made enquiries as to the likelihood of a peaceful night's sleep.

"Most welcome. Yes, you can stay here." The two men slept up on the roofs of the

car with mosquito nets drawn over them while the women and children locked the doors and hoped for the best. At three in the morning shouts were heard and the army trucks started revving their engines. "Una enda wapi (where are you going)?" shouted dad at the last of the fleeing trucks.

"We are not staying here!" came a distant reply. So much for security!

My father and uncle looked at each other and telepathically said to one another, "Neither are we!"

So, one of my first memories of Uganda, is making a run for the border during a military takeover of the country.

Sitting there by the fire I wondered how long I would last with the bolt action 300 Win Mag against a line of AK47s. The answer was simple and so I ignored the smoke from the fires burning in the south of the park as I tried to relax before turning in for the night.

The camp was situated between some light forests and the river's edge. It is on a perch of dry land, slightly raised above the neighbouring pockets of papyrus swamps on either side of it. On the first few days we used to hear the raucous squabbling from baboons in the surrounding trees. Then one morning I had enough of the thieving and bullying primates and shot one to prove a point.

Baboons are bad company, in my mind. They kill young animals, small antelope and any other monkey or primate they take a disliking to. The concession used to have a lot more duiker and Colobus monkeys, in particular, before the baboon population got so hefty. In the name of encouraging biodiversity and establishing equilibrium they could do with being thinned out a bit more.

Anyway, one fine day I drove out with my friend Cameron Hopkins and a team of six anti-poaching staff towards the Zoka Forest. Cameron and Bruce Martin had organised this excursion with the intended purpose of establishing a greater presence in East Madi and helping towards opening up the territory again, after a quiet off-season. In truth, it barely resembled a fully functional hunting block. The airstrip had grown over in waist high and thick grasses and saplings, the bridges were loose and crumbling and the camps were basic and neglected. As I was still learning the ins and outs of Ugandan Hunting I, willingly, got drafted to help.

It was a lot about fixing broken vehicles and tired equipment, driving the worst roads, getting unstuck, transporting everyone to and from camp safely and putting our lives at some risk to protect and preserve wildlife. Unfortunately it also included digging out traps, as one of the chores we had to be willing to undertake.

A few days into our trip, at the edge of the Zoka Forest, we pulled up the Land Rover and headed in to the thick stuff on foot. We walked in single file with Angelo and Komakash leading the way and conferring amongst each other about the likely game trails to be used to set traps by the thriving population of poachers. About an hour or two of walking through some heavy bush we were getting into the fringes of the forest. The flora had changed and the dampness of the forest could be felt when the wind stirred. Just before we saw Tarzan-country, Angelo yelled out and we all came up to where he was standing.

"There, you see..?"

He uncovered a metal plate from the leaf and grass litter along the trail. It lay lifeless and cold in the dappled sunlight, as a very alien object in this land which was otherwise pristine. Angelo raised a club and walloped the plate downward into the



Trap taken out of the ground

recesses of the shallow pit and the jaws of the trap closed with a ferocious bite. The teeth snapped as the jaws collided and the trap jumped free of the earth. It had a circumference large enough to crush a man's leg to tatters just above the top of his hiking boot, and possessed power which would terrify you.

These particular traps are made from reshaped car springs. The leaf-spring is used for both the mouth and the mechanism of the trap. They vary in size and weight. This one was one of the bigger varieties with spiked teeth welded to its edges. The trap is so effective at immobilising and crippling the victim that the poachers do not bother fixing it to anything immovable. No animal would walk capably after stepping on this trap and would more than likely bleed out or die in agony before the poacher returned with a gun or spear to offer it the coup de grâce.

We lifted it out of the soil and brought it along into the forest. The Zoka is a beautiful place and Cameron was keen to explore it while I was checking where I put every footstep in view of what we had just unearthed.

In the Zoka Forest the vines spill from the canopy and it reminded me of some of my boyhood days spent in the Ituri Forest in the Congo. It was thick stuff with monstrous trees and beautiful foliage, and it hurt me to think of what would happen to this forest if we lost the fight against animal poachers and the hatchets and machetes of the charcoal burners' intent on encroaching on this land.

With a long and slow drive back to base-camp our minds wandered in their own directions and the heat and tiredness from our exertions took their toll. The only constant reminder to our present situation was a frequent bite from a tsetse fly. Like small cuts from a razor blade on tender skin, around your ankles and neck



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Defiance - original oil painting by Keith McAllister

in particular, they are a real pest when steady driving is required to get you and your team up a muddy embankment in another patch of forest. Butterflies would sometimes flutter away from the tyre track and the cool moist air would get a blast of diesel fumes as the Land Rover surged onward in low range up another embankment.

We had all played a part in building the bridges we were using to get the vehicle to and from our latest projects. Lunches were had in the bush and washed down with lukewarm water. Blisters were raised, burst, scabbed, healed and forgotten as the weeks dragged on. With elation we sometimes caught sight of an antelope fleeing our advancement, but most of the time it was work, work, work.

In the evenings I would take what was left of my energy and head out in search of wildlife. It was the wrong time of year for good visibility, but you could read the game trails for the daily news.

A small herd of buffalo had headed this way in the morning, and crossed again a mile ahead when heading back after drinking from the river over there. A good sized bushbuck had walked ten metres or so off the dirt road before heading that way. One morning I saw some Sitatunga tracks in the sand a mile from camp and I smiled at the realisation that one of Uganda's most prized antelope had paid us a visit. A Defasa Waterbuck broke cover one afternoon before sundown and I watched it run a hundred yards before it vanished in the thicket.

Many evenings I would get back after sundown and thank Komakesh for accompanying me on my little excursions. Once or twice we both got caught out in the rain and got soaked to the bone. On such occasions I thought of the poor rifle first and foremost and would use my shirt to cover the action of the rifle and protect



In The Silent Places- original oil painting by Keith McAllister



UWA hat badge


it from getting overly wet. We would pick up the pace on our journey home. Tired and waterlogged we would tramp in to camp and I would dry and clean the rifle and walk back out into the rain with a gin & tonic in hand, understanding that I could not possibly be any more soaked and that it was time for a drink.

Cameron helped me learn a few things about what to expect from my new life in African Hunting, and let me take over when my years of African experience was already all I needed for the job at hand. He was very gracious to recognise where our experience overlapped and who should take control of situations. So, we settled down to a life of mutual understanding and talked about everything from religion, to the women in our lives, to family life back home, writers we admired, crazy things we had done and, of course, hunting.

We spent every day, except Sundays, working alongside the regular staff that had been hired as hunters, trackers, skinners and work-hands. Being an effective leader of these men boiled down to your level of African experience, and general sense of humour and sense of purpose, in equal measure. Having accumulated roughly 15 years of relevant experience up until that point I felt quite at home from the start. After that trip to East Madi I heard that the concession had been closed, and deemed unsafe by the Uganda Wildlife Authority. So we lost the fight for the park, and the animals will have to fend for themselves until we are allowed to try again at turning it into a workable wildlife conservancy and hunting block.

I received this news when I had shortly returned home from hospital, having suffered with Falciparum malaria in the weeks that followed.

"What a waste!" was all I could say, in light of the news.

What a waste of my time, our time, and the good men who would no longer be employed to work there as a result. What a waste of the wildlife that is now left unguarded, the forests that would be felled and burned, and the earth that had never been scared by the plough. What a waste.... 

KMc