

THE ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER RHINO

By Leon Munyan

My wife, daughter and I had been on a two-week safari, traveling to various ranches and lodges in search of trophy species. As usual, we had some good luck and some bad luck. After hunting lion unsuccessfully for forty-two days on previous trips, I did manage to take a full-maned lion. We were on the second to the last day of the safari, and it was time to pursue rhino.

This hunt, with TAM Safaris, was for the final animal I needed to complete the Big 5 Slam of African species: lion, buffalo, elephant, leopard, and rhino. As with most very large game hunts, planning for this one had been ongoing for the past two years. The first choice I had to make when I started the process was to decide whether to *shoot* a white rhino or to *dart* a white rhino. To tell you the truth, I had never considered darting an animal. The decision was made easier because shooting a real trophy rhino cost in the range of \$100,000, while TAM Safaris had made me an attractive offer to dart what they hoped would be the SCI #1 white rhino—and for far less cost. This particular rhino had never been darted because of the fear of harming it, thus losing a very expensive future trophy. My timing was perfect because the rhino had grown to a size they wanted, needing to have it on the ground to certify its measurements for a safari *shooting* hunt. TAM Safaris allowed me the opportunity to hunt and dart this rhino because I only use a handgun, and there were no handgun darted rhino in the record book. I had waited until the end of this hunt because I thought to myself *how hard could it be to take a rhino?* Little did I know!

We started scouting at very first light with the assistance of several trackers on horses and on foot, scouring the area for this particular rhino. It only took a few hours to locate the bull and start our stalk. That's when I discovered the major problem: rhino are not necessarily afraid of humans; they can run like sprinters and attack. It turns out that the average dart gun *rifle* is capable of tranquilizing a rhino at approximately 45 yards. I had found a gunsmith in Johannesburg who was willing to build me a *dart* handgun. When we tested the gun on the day before the hunt, we soon discovered that the dart's effectiveness was only good out to 18 yards! So much for an easy hunt.

We went into "full stalking" mode and actually came within 30 yards of the rhino before his younger partner, which had wandered downwind, scented us, both of them blowing out of the area. In spite of my preconceived notions, when you're hiding behind a small bush and a 5000 pound animal shakes the ground as it runs past, you know you are hunting Africa's "dangerous game." My wife, who had been along with us, decided, wisely, to keep a safer distance back (that is, 45–50 yards) on the next stalk!

Another surprise for me was the condition of these rhino. These were not the flabby rhino I have seen in various zoos around the world. These guys had to haul their bulk all day over rough terrain in order to sustain themselves; they were buffed

out. I called them the "Arnold Schwarzenegger" of rhino.

Now that we knew this was "hunting," not just shooting, we decided the only way to get within 18 yards of this rhino was to wait in ambush. Rhino do not necessarily graze in a straight pattern. After two hours, the rhino finally lowered his guard and grazed leisurely. We tried several attempts to determine his pattern and set up an ambush. Finally, we got lucky (sort of) because it fed straight to us. Sounds like a perfect situation, unless you're the guy with the dart handgun sitting behind another small bush when the beast comes straight at you then veers around the bush at the last moment. As the rhino's shoulder cleared the bush at less than 5 yards away, I squeezed the trigger. POOF! That didn't sound good. I asked my PH (Professional Hunter), who was standing behind me with the cameraman, "Did I hit him?" The cameraman took his camera and focused it 3 feet in front of me to show the dart lying on the ground! (Thanks; great video!) We then discovered problem number two: The dart gun would not hold the pressure of the compressed air for more than a few minutes. So, now I would have to get within 18 yards of the rhino, undetected, and *then* load the gun—lovely! The next stalk didn't work either because I made too much of a commotion in trying to load that unfamiliar contraption.

Another two-hour wait, and there was only time for one more attempt before we had to quit for the evening. By now this otherwise docile animal was on full alert. After being chased for eight hours, he was as keen as a whitetail. We found the bull and made it to within 45 yards. As he was, indeed, wary at this point, he would not leave the open plains, so there was ostensibly no concealment. I thought we were through, but the PH came up with a game plan—not necessarily a plan I would've come up with, but when in Africa . . .

Other than putting me at considerable risk, the plan was relatively simple: There was a very shallow drainage channel (about 1-foot deep) in front of us that had been eroded from the recent rains. This channel eventually wandered to within about 18 yards of the rhino. Our plan (the PH's plan!) was to lie flat in this channel and inch our way forward to the rhino. I had no idea what we would do or what would happen when we got there—other than get trampled—but there was no other choice. To compound matters, the rhino had seen us and was glaring in our direction, all the while, during the following scenario:

The PH got into the ditch and slithered along the muddy bottom by using only his feet to push himself forward (no hand or body motion to disturb the rhino). Too, I slithered into the ditch with my head at his feet. As I saw his feet move to push himself forward, I followed suit, never looking up to see where the rhino was [hopefully, not on top of us]. Forty-five minutes later, after slithering and sliding, the PH slowly motioned with his fingers for me to slide up beside him. I did, and he proceeded to explain that the rhino was 19 yards away, looking straight at us, with a bush in front of him. He explained that I would have to jump up and instantly shoot over the top of the bush; the rhino would whirl, and I would have a broadside or a rump shot, either one of which would get the job done, tranquilizing the animal.

When I jumped up, not knowing whether the rhino would charge or run, I

discovered the bush was taller than we had anticipated. I could barely see the rhino's backbone above the bush. The rhino instantly whirled, and I had a split-second decision. My thought was that since the dart from this handgun would drop about 6 inches at 18 yards, I could aim at his backbone and the dart would zero in perfectly. NOT! With the naked eye, it appeared that the dart bounced off the top of the backbone and did not tranquilize the rhino. Fortunately, TAM Safaris had hired a professional videographer to accompany us on the hunt, so they could certify the rhino's size and measurements. We reviewed the videographer's footage and saw that the dart flew straight as a bullet, with no drop, and went through the rhino's backbone. About that time, the trackers who had been pursuing the rhino radioed us that the animal was semi-tranquilized and crashing through trees and bushes. This was a major problem because a rhino's horn is a growth of hair that detaches from the skull if it suffers enough blunt trauma! Hence, the rhino would not be offered up for another hunt.

We covered a one-mile trek to the rhino in a time that would make any Olympic runner smile! The rhino was stumbling around and crashing trees and the PH was shouting, "Shoot, shoot him anywhere you can hit him." After another dart, the rhino was finally down for the count! Then the excitement really began because the rhino had one and a half doses of tranquilizer in him, and they were worried that he would expire before they could administer the antidote (adrenaline).

We quickly took pictures and certified the SCI measurements on the horn size, and the attending veterinarian did shots, blood tests, eye drops, and inserted an identifier chip (up the butt; the only place a needle would penetrate!). As I was standing alone next to the rhino, with a hand on its shoulder, Peter Tam told me he had administered the antidote. Everyone else in the hunting party, including my wife (whew), was a hundred yards away at the hunting vehicle. I thought the rhino would take fifteen minutes to slowly wake up and stagger around for a while. Wrong! When the adrenaline hit his system, the rhino jumped up, whirled around and gave me a "you must die" glare. I screamed like a little girl and started running. Two problems: The nearest tree was more than 50 yards, and the Arnold Schwarzenegger of rhinos could run a helluva lot faster than I could! The ground was shaking as the rhino ran after me, and I swear I could feel his breath down my neck when Peter Tam (the PH of TAM Safaris) ran between the rhino and me. Peter, 30 years my junior, had assisted and guided many rhino hunts. From his experience, he, of course, knew that a rhino could easily run down a person, but that they could not maneuver in tight circles after being tranquilized. Peter had the red rag that we had placed over the rhino's eyes in order to keep him calm while we took pictures. So, while moving in tight circles, Peter waved that red rag in front of the rhino's face in order to distract it, taking the attention off of me. After a couple revolutions, the rhino wandered off into the brush. Somehow, my pants were still dry!

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The Tam family really knows how to throw a celebration party. They had invited fifty of their friends and neighboring landowners to the fest that evening. Wearing colorful costumes, the local natives put on an authentic African dance exhibition. The highlight was when I was put on a large “king’s seat” and paraded around on the shoulders of the trackers. There were five huge barbecue pits for cooking more food than we could all possibly eat. After a day of adrenaline rushes and several Sundowner cocktails, that evening is still somewhat fuzzy. That celebration surpassed others put on for me by the natives in other countries, as when I shot a leopard, a lion, and a giant Lord Derby eland—and those were all *grand* parties.

What I thought would be a simple point-and-shoot hunt turned out to be one of the most memorable hunts of my life—and I have taken 113 species of animals in Africa with a handgun.