



<b>THE BUFFALO THAT CHOSE ME</b>	<b>2006</b>
<b>Story by Peter Flack</b>	



I made a big mistake. Two in fact. I became separated from my professional hunter, Geoffroy de Gentile, by about ten metres and I failed to find a tree.

When the drumming sound of big, heavy hooves thundered across the leaf sodden forest floor I could not at first determine the direction of the deep, bass sounds. Then the crackling noise of tearing, ripping vines and the crashing sound of breaking, smashing of rain rotted branches announced the imminent arrival of the buffaloes.

I was caught in no-mans land with only a four inch diameter sapling as a friend to my front and my diminutive pygmy gunbearer, Mombato, holding a handful of my shirt, to the rear.

I was on the western edge of a small opening, maybe 30 paces in diameter, in Mayo Oldiri's 275 000 acre, rain forest concession in the South Eastern corner of Cameroon where it borders the Republic of Congo. I say opening not clearing, because we were still in the deep, dark, dappled shadows under a complete canopy of 200 foot high trees, but the undergrowth was less dense in the small, oval patch in which we were standing.

I could stand upright for once and turn through 360 degrees without becoming entangled in vines, lianas, leaves and branches. And instead of my sight being limited to the more normal 15 to 20 paces, I had a reasonably clear view across the opening except for the middle section which was cluttered with a dome of dense thicket about 12 paces in diameter. I stood rooted to the spot about five or six paces from the closest edge of the thicket. Diagonally to my right front, Geoffroy stood behind a fallen tree trunk, his .500 Krieghof double at the ready. I started to move towards him, urged on by Mombato, but it was too late.

Big, reddish tan bodies burst into the opening maybe three or four paces in front of Geoffroy. In the blink of an eye, they passed behind the screen of thicket to my front, turned hard left through ninety degrees and headed straight for me.

The lead buffalo, a cow I think, bent to hook at Glock, a smaller version of Jock of the Bushveld, who fearlessly ran to attack her. This gave Dragon, a courageous, little, one-eyed dog, with beagle somewhere in his dim and distant past, a chance to leap at her face. The cow turned sharp left again and headed back the way she had come with a bright, red tan calf in tow and a charcoal bruiser of a bull, with tan patches on his ears, a further few paces behind. The bull passed by Geoffroy within spitting distance. As they

faded from sight and sound, I heard lots of words like "merde" and "putain", which I did not understand. Whatever they meant, however, I am sure they referred to me and the relatively easy opportunity I missed (had I stood next to him as I was supposed to), to down a trophy quality, dwarf forest buffalo bull.

It was our sixteenth day of buffalo hunting in these dim, dark, dank rain forests and, for the first 14 of them, I had become progressively more and more despondent. Geoffroy had lost his lead tracker, Jean Quatre, killed by an elephant in the week before I arrived. Yes, to the dim, dark and dank you can add another "D" for dangerous. His second tracker, who had been excellent in tracking the outstanding forest elephant I shot in the first week of the safari, developed a mystery ailment in his left elbow which, amazingly, incapacitated him. Geoffroy explained that this was a regular occurrence. Said he was like a match - you could only use him once! Number three in line was promoted beyond his level of competence. He turned out to be a bully, a poor tracker and worse leader of our eight man, Baka pygmy hunting team and either could not or would not follow instructions. He was fired. Before this, he had single-handedly spooked three separate buffaloes in the "late finals" of a stalk due to his blundering, undisciplined behaviour.

We now had an essentially new, untried and untested team. A week earlier we had moved from our camp at Lognia (pronounced "lonya") to a poorly designed and equipped fly camp right on the main logging route in Mayo Oldiri's North Boumba concession. It had been a mistake to move. While there certainly were buffalo in the area, which was well serviced by the fast overgrowing tracks left by the uncontrolled tree-felling of the logging company, the forest was unbelievably dense and every step forward entailed a huge effort of cutting, slashing, dodging and ducking. It took over an hour to cover a kilometer and we sounded like a company of motorized infantry moving through the forest. The two stalks we made ended in frustration with the sound of distant hoof beats as the only compensation, other than a good 4 ½ inch Peter's duiker, with enormously thick horn bases, which I shot when it inexplicably ventured out onto the forest track some 80 paces to our front. Shot is possibly the wrong verb as the .416 Rigby simply glued the beautiful little animal to the ground.

Before we could explore the region fully, however, we were expelled from our camp by the pistol toting, rude and deeply unpleasant manager of the logging company who drove all the way to Moloundou, the capitol of the region, and back with a wildlife official in tow to advise us that Mayo Oldiri had no right to hunt the area, despite an apparent agreement with government to the contrary. We later learnt that he had also accused us of hunting at night and interfering with the logging operations, both palpable lies. Despite the protestations of Geoffroy and the pygmies, however, it was to no avail and the large, blubbery bureaucrat from Moloundou was loud, arrogant and adamant. To avoid a fight and further unpleasantness, we left.

Cameroon, under the leadership of Mr. Paul Biya for the last 23 years, is well known for its soccer prowess but it is very competitive in one other area. The international competition it wins more than any other is that of the most corrupt country in the world (four times no less in the last eight years) and I wondered how much a part this propensity played in our expulsion so that the logging company could carry on unhindered in its grotesque rape of these pristine rain forests without the prying eyes of unbribable outsiders to see and tell.

We drove back to Lognia the same day and the heavens opened. It poured all day and most of the night. It was just the break we needed. Heavy rain makes the forest animals cold, wet and uncomfortable and they move out of the forest into the open areas to dry out and warm up. The rain also washes away any old tracks, allows you to walk really quietly on and through the sodden undergrowth and the steady drip, tap, drop of water filtering down through layered leaves and the irregular, crashing fall off rain rotted branches, camouflages what little sound you make. It was for precisely this reason that I had chosen to hunt in the wettest part of the hunting season in June/July 2005.

The day before, we had woken at 5:00 a.m. as usual and were out of camp by 5:45 a.m. We picked up the first fresh tracks of two buffaloes less than an hour later. We had now settled on a hunting strategy of three pygmy trackers in the lead, followed by Geoffroy, myself and my gun bearer, Mombato. About 100 metres behind us four other pygmies followed each with a hunting dog on a lead. Geoffroy was in contact with his dog pack leader (especially chosen because he was scared of buffalo and therefore not likely to crowd the tracking unit) and lead tracker via radios married to ear pieces which allowed for silent comms. The dogs were to be released on Geoffroy's command if and when we spooked the buffalo and the idea was for them to try and bay the lone buffalo we were following (our first choice when it came to choosing a track to follow) or the bull in the small herd, seldom larger than five animals (our second choice). Up until now, however, we had released the dogs eight times and, although seemingly eager to get to work, they only ran a short way and gave a few desultory barks before returning to us with tails wagging as if to say, "that will show them who's boss here". As one of my Texan friends put it, they were as much use as "tits on a boar hawg".

We hunted really well that morning and caught the first two buffaloes totally unawares. At 25 paces I could move no closer, could not understand what the pygmy tracker was trying to tell me and my inexperience in forest hunting showed. I thought the buffalo was standing and facing to my right while it was actually lying and heading in the opposite direction. The shot, intended for its broad, green leaf covered shoulder, disappeared without a trace into the forest along with the two buffaloes. In the tree canopy an unseen blue and yellow giant turaco mocked us with its distinctive "kak, kak, kak" call while a troop of funeral black and washing powder white colobus monkeys "hurr hurr hurred" in agreement.

But my day was not over. We picked up a fresh, lone, bull track at just before 10:00 a.m. and, two hours later, in a very dense, dark section of the forest, came face to horn with the bull at about 25 paces. All I could make out in the Stygian gloom was the tips of the horns and, despite the urgings of Joseph, one of our trackers, I simply refused to repeat my earlier error and loose a 400 grain .416 Rigby round into the leaves. The ten or so seconds I had to find an identifiable body part through the thick cover was not enough and the bull thundered off still sight unseen.

This was more like it. Although I was disappointed in myself, it had been an exciting morning and we had hunted really well as a team. It was like no hunting I had ever known before. The odds were totally stacked in the animal's favour. As Geoffroy said in his inimitable, French accent, "Ear, to win ze buffle it must first make a mistake. No mistake, no buffle". Not only that but the forest was literally crawling with poacher pressured elephants and irascible lowland gorillas which all needed to be avoided and

evaded along with the flies, bees, millipedes, caterpillars, ants, worms, ticks, fleas, mosquitoes, beetles, insects and rapacious plants and thorns all, like Shylock, intent on extracting their pound of flesh, not to mention blood. It is these micro predators that are the really dangerous ones. When coupled with the very humid climate, which seems to incubate germs and causes wound to fester, it partly explains why the pygmies have such a short life expectancy of barely 40 years.

There are no predators of any size in the rain forests. No lions or hyenas. There are leopards but they are small and few and far between. The pressure on the game comes from relentless, commercial, bush meat poaching (the 12 man, Lognia anti-poaching squad have caught seven poachers and recovered hundreds of snares and scores of smoked and recently killed animals so far this year). Also, because shots in the forest are rarely at distances in excess of 30 paces, when animals become aware of you, you are slap bang in the middle of their flight or flight circle and they have learnt, through bitter past experience, that offence is often the best form of defence. In these circumstances there is on way of knowing whether they are going to run at or away from you.

After the three buffaloes roared out of the oval shaped forest opening that fateful sixteenth morning, it took more than a moment or three to compose myself. My heart was hammering in my chest and the backs of my knees had a strange sponginess to them. Then Geoffroy started his diatribe in French and those pygmies that had not run away or climbed trees started jabbering loudly, pointing excitedly and talking all at once. I had never seen them so animated and it lasted all the way back to the vehicle. En route, I saw Geoffroy bend his head to listen to the radio strapped to his left shoulder. Turning to me he said, "ze anti-poaching team ave found anoizzer trasse. We go now. It is far".

We started into the forest on the north western side of the concession just after midday. The going became progressively thicker and tougher. Suddenly, I was enveloped by an avalanche of sound. Roaring, screaming, shrieking, drumming erupted from our left front. Whatever was making the horrendous, bowel emptying cacophony was crashing, thrashing and rushing through the forest towards us at breakneck speed tearing apart everything in its path as if it was a mere spider web. I levitated two paces backward as the thicket bulged to my left. My rifle was locked into my shoulder, safety off and, if someone had so much as breathed on my trigger finger, 400 grains of Federal's best was going to blast through the middle of the noise with my blessings.

Then there was silence. So complete that not a bird called. Not a cicada zizzed. Not a fly flew. Into the silence, one of the Baka dropped a word like a hand grenade in a gold fish bowl, "Bobo". It was one of three mock charges I experienced from these huge, silver backed, lowland gorillas and it was not an experience which grew on me. I found each simply shattering and needed all my self control not to make an idiot of myself.

The tracks took us into a thorn infested swamp. We ever so quietly managed to skirt an elephant bull snoozing in the midday humidity and then plashed our way, pace after noisy pace, through thick, ankle deep, boot sucking, glutinous, grey mud and even deeper rusty brown water. My ankle length, waterproof boot slipped off a water slick exposed tree root and I half slid, half fell into the mud. My knee length, nylon gaiter stopped the watery mud filling my left boot but, just as I was congratulating myself, I

came down hard on my right leg to stop myself falling and stepped neatly into a knee deep, elephant footprint. I could feel the cold water and mud filling the space between my Goretex sock and boot and silently cursed. After the morning's excitement and two hours on the new tracks, I was feeling the pace and the pressure but our three diminutive pygmy trackers, Jean Pierre, Paul and Josef, were like bloodhounds, bent over at the waist and totally focused with an air of taut tenseness about them that they developed when the track was freshening and we were closing in.

At last we emerged from the swamp and found two piles of olive green dung on the tracks covered by a thin skin. "That's over two hours old", I said to Geoffroy who nodded in agreement. Somehow we had confused the age of the tracks. Possibly the wetness of the swamp had made the tracks look fresher than they were. We moved off the tracks onto a "bimo" or elephant highway through the forest (which was more open and made movement easier) and turned to call our trackers. As I turned, Mombato stage whispered to Geoffroy in French while cupping his hand to his ear, "I hear the buffalo. They are leaving. Release the dogs! Release the dogs!"

Geoffroy muttered into his radio and the dogs came haring soundlessly past us - they are trained to bark only when they see the prey. Seconds later hysterical barking erupted close to our right. Geoffroy shouted, "Find a tree! Find a tree!" After that morning I didn't need a written invitation. Following Geoffroy up a three foot high mound in the forest from which a strong, straight, grey white, lichen covered tree trunk extended, I felt marginally more secure only to realize that the dogs were quiet once more.

Everyone around me was like a bird dog on point - head and ears craned towards the direction of the last sounds. Then the dogs opened up again a little further away. "Come. We go", Geoffroy hurled over his shoulder as he hurried off the trail into the depths of the forest.

I battled to keep up as a branch snatched at my baseball cap. An impossibly thin liana tangled around my legs and I nearly tripped and fell as I half jumped to pull free. Thorn encrusted vines ripped at my shirt and slashed my face. The barking was coming closer as I caught up to Geoffroy on the edge of an opening about a dozen paces in diameter. "Back against that tree" he instructed not bothering to lower his voice as he pointed behind us. No sooner had I reached the tree, with Mombato slightly behind me and to my left and Geoffroy in a similar position behind Mombato, than the dense, waxy green shrubbery to our front burst open and a yellowy tan buffalo calf, with short devil-like horns, galloped into the opening.

"Don't shoot" yelled Geoffroy as the calf turned sharp left on seeing us and exited the opening to my right. As the calf crossed in front of us, a second animal, twice its size, exploded into the opening hot on the calf's heels and headed straight for us. The .416 fired itself and the buffalo ploughed into the ground exactly four paces from where I stood. All around me men were shouting, dogs were chattering hysterically - barking, yelping, yodeling cries. The forest floor was alive with the sound of thundering hooves, the bashing and crashing of bushes, shrubs with leaves and lianas being ripped apart in minor explosions of force and violence. My eyes darted from side to side across the opening. Mombato pulled me through 180 degrees shouting "Buffle, buffle" and pointing urgently behind me. I saw a charcoal shaded tan shape drum past about 30 paces away and then, suddenly, it was over. For moments I stood stock still. I felt

almost as if I was waking from a surreal dream. And like a dream I cannot really recreate in my mind what happened in the split seconds it took for the dwarf buffalo cow to cover the eight or so paces across the opening towards us.

What I do know is that Mark Sullivan has nothing to fear from me. I did not ask the buffalo how it wanted to die. It was the buffalo that was asking all the questions. I would like to say that I calmly shouldered my rifle, waited patiently for the buffalo to come closer and drop its head, then stapled the crosshairs to a spot between its eyes and carefully squeezed the trigger. But I can't. I cannot remember anything other than seeing the buffalo's head filling the scope. I cannot even remember mounting the rifle or pulling the trigger.

Like most big game hunters I have often imagined the situation and tried to think through how best to react. I have read dozens of accounts of experienced professional hunters killing charging animals and have even watched a few on video. I have also repeatedly practised downing simulated buffalo charges on various shooting ranges but with such poor results that I have always vowed never to wound a dangerous animal in order not to have to confront a charge and, correctly so, because in the actual case in point, I was hopeless. I missed the entire head of the buffalo. The bullet shaved the left cheek of the cow, passed through the left ear, entered the neck about 12 inches behind the ear, which it broke, and lodged under the skin behind the off shoulder. If it had been one of those big, bus bodied Cape buffaloes, I don't think the bullet would have had the same effect and I would now be playing a harp in the company of a very small pygmy and a very lanky Frenchman.

Afterwards, when we reconstructed the events that took place in the small, rugby ball shaped opening, it seemed as if the cow was merely running away from the dogs roughly on the heels of her weaned calf. Her course would probably have taken her past me by about a pace to my left but directly towards Geoffroy and Mombato who stood in a staggered formation behind me and to my left. Unless of course she saw me, in which case she might have converted a flat out run into a charge by the simple expedient of changing course to the left by one step.

Before I booked the hunt, both Alain Lefol and Rudy Lubin, two of the most decent and experienced rain forest professional hunters active in West Africa today, both made very similar comments when I asked their advice. In essence, they said that rain forest hunting for elephant and buffalo might not be everyone's cup of tea but it was the greatest adventure left in African hunting. After 28 days in south eastern Cameroon, I have to agree with them.

Geoffroy says, and I agree with him as well, that if canned killing is at one end of the spectrum, then rain forest hunting for elephant and buffalo is at the extreme opposite end. Cow or no cow, this aggressive, tough, tenacious, pugnacious, dwarf forest buffalo will have pride of place in my trophy room to remind me of two days of the most exciting and exhilarating hunting that I have ever experienced.