

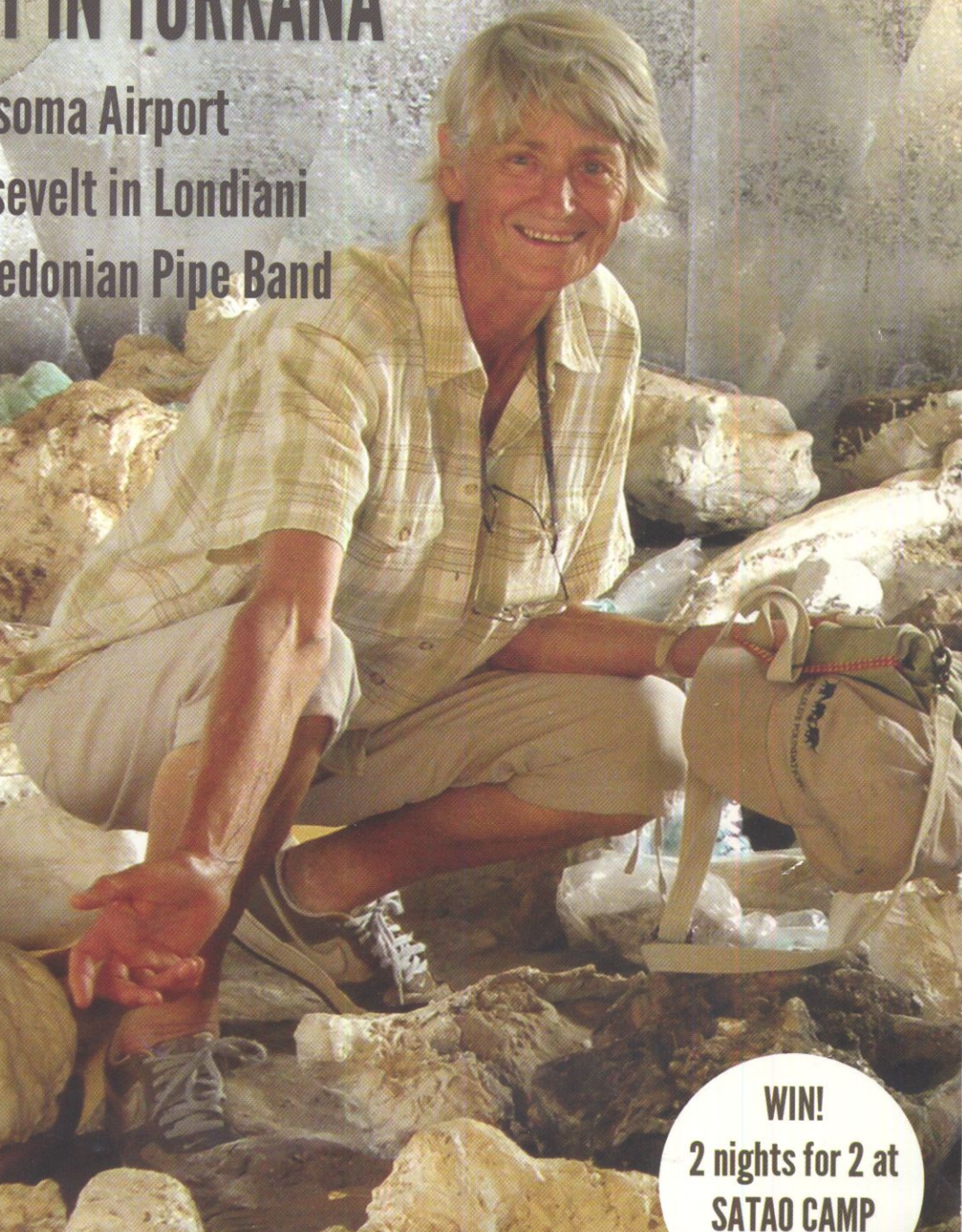
Issue 95 | June-July 2021 | 500/-

OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* **EAST AFRICA'S PAST**

MEAVE LEAKEY IN TURKANA

Benin Bronzes | Musoma Airport
Ludwig Krapf | Roosevelt in Londiani
Sultan Somjee | Caledonian Pipe Band



WIN!
2 nights for 2 at
SATAO CAMP

WRESTLING WITH RHINOS PART 13

THE ADVENTURES OF A GLASGOW VET IN KENYA

by Dr Jerry Haigh

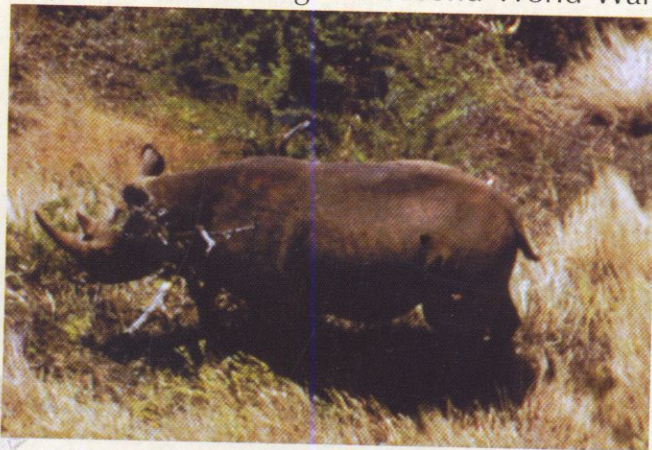
In the last episode, Jerry Haigh vaccinated almost 100,000 head of cattle against a new form of foot-and-mouth disease. The story continues...

The annual tennis tournament, which drew mixed-doubles teams from clubs around the country, was in full swing at Makuyu. Between matches that Saturday, Tony Parkinson and I sat at the bar. He was there representing Kabete's Vet Lab Sports Club; I had been asked to come across from Meru and play with the Nanyuki side. We had played together on the winning Vet Lab team in 1966.

As we sipped our pints of chilled gin and bitter lemon, topped up with lemonade, Tony suddenly said, "Jerry, John and I have been catching rhino for years using trucks, ropes, and chases. We're thinking of changing to the new drugging methods that are being developed. Would you be interested in getting involved? I have a dart gun, but we need a vet to administer the capture drugs and work out doses. Would you be free for a few days at the end of next month?"

My career took a 90-degree turn, as I replied that I would be more than willing.

Tony had been involved in conservation for almost 20 years, and had worked with his godfather, John Seago, since his teenage years. John, the brother of East Anglian landscape artist Edward Seago, had served in motor torpedo boats during the Second World War.



A rhino darted from the helicopter is dazed and coming to a stop.

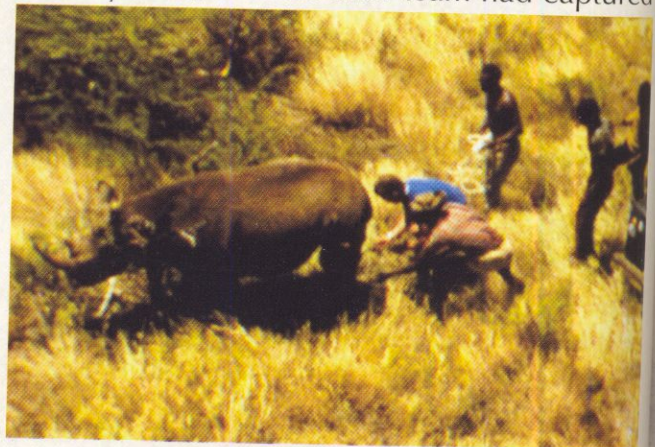
He had contracted TB and had been advised to move to a better climate, so once the war ended he'd moved to Kenya.

The two had a reputation as a very efficient team who knew a tremendous amount about the capture and translocation of a wide variety of Kenya's wildlife. They captured animals for zoos and also translocated animals within the country from areas being cleared for human settlement. They had recently been involved in moving the scarce roan antelope from an area near Embu that was destined for settlement. Pictures of Tony riding herd on a group of roan as they entered a huge trap, several acres in size, surrounded by piled thorn bush, had appeared in a local wildlife magazine.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there were still large numbers of rhinoceros in many parts of the country. Rhino are highly territorial, which has made them an easy target for the unbridled poaching that has devastated their populations throughout the continent. It is easy to find out where a rhino is living, simply by identifying manure heaps, which accumulate at the boundaries of his home range.

A rhino would be an impossible tenant on a small farm. He would lay waste to any attempt at crop agriculture. Building a heavy thorn boma would be a complete waste of time as a rhino deterrent. Their thick hide and wedged shape mean that rhino can go through thorn bushes like a hot knife through butter.

Tony and John and their team had captured



The capture crew runs in to hobble the rhino with ropes.



Wrestling the rhino onto a sled so it can be transported.

many species of large animal by using heavy vehicles to chase their quarry through the bush until they were close enough to drop a noose over the neck. This method had disadvantages for both the animal and the personnel involved, and it also took a fierce toll on the vehicles. A running rhino can reach speeds of almost 30 miles an hour, and can turn at right angles even when going all out.

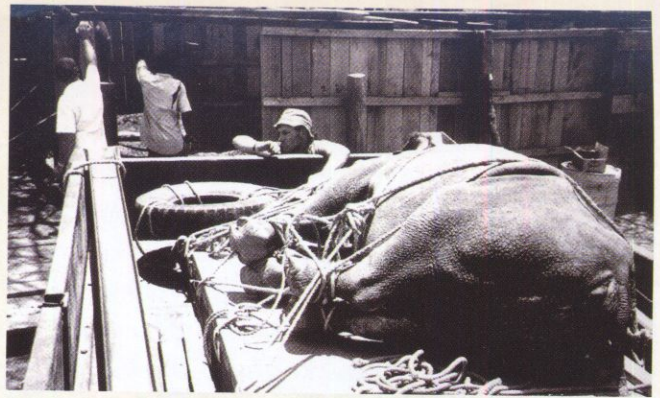
The new dart gun, if it worked, would certainly make the whole process much easier and safer.

I had treated a couple of white rhino in Meru National Park, but I had no experience working with free-ranging black rhino. I decided to load my darts with the drug cocktail that I had used successfully on the white rhino, but choosing the right needles was a challenge. Rhinos have about the thickest hide of any land animal. The ordinary needle used by a vet to treat cows was simply not going to do the job. Even the commercially made darting needles available at the time were not robust enough for this task.

I took the problem to my friend Buster Cook, who had a farm called Enderasha near Nanyuki. Buster, a keen amateur engineer, had his own metal shop. I showed him the needle that I had obtained, as well as the dart barrel and other bits and pieces. "I need a needle that is stout, has a small barb to stop it jumping out, will go through thick hide without cutting out a plug and getting blocked, and most awkward of all, will fit into the thread of the barrel, which seems to be an odd size. I am stumped."

Buster leaned forward and looked over his half-moon glasses. He took out a micrometre gauge from the top pocket of his overalls and began to measure things.

"Hm. This is a special thread; we will have to manufacture the thread to fit it ourselves. Let's walk over to the workshop and see what



Dr Jerry Haigh does a final breathing check on a tranquilized rhino before unloading it.

we have." Buster soon had a brass rod, metal tubing, and small tools lined up on the bench. "Leave this with me for a couple of days, and I'll give you a ring when I think I've got something."

Buster had half a dozen needles ready for me two days later, beautifully crafted with three-inch tubing set into a brass base. A short piece of spring wire had been soldered on about an inch from the base as a barb.

Tony had given me clear instructions to his camp beyond Isiolo on the road to Marsabit. I parked the car in the shade of a grove of flat-topped acacia and greeted Tony and John. Tony introduced his solidly built foreman Alexander and his head catcher Mwaniki.

That evening, as we sat around the mess area, John explained the situation. "We have an arrangement with the government to remove as many rhino as possible from this area, as it has been scheduled for settlement. We're working on a 'one for one' basis. When we catch one animal for movement to a national park, we get another one for ourselves. Most of the latter will go to American zoos, after we have held them here and acclimatized them for about a month."

The government share of the captured rhino were mostly slated to be taken to Meru National Park, with several others to go to Courtland Parfet's place at Solio. They estimated there might be as many as 50 rhino between the camp and the Nyambenis, our main area of operation.

In the morning at breakfast, the plan for the day unfolded. Two trackers named Meru and Maina had gone out at first light trying to find a rhino. "When an animal lies down to sleep they will pinpoint it and come and fetch us," Tony said.

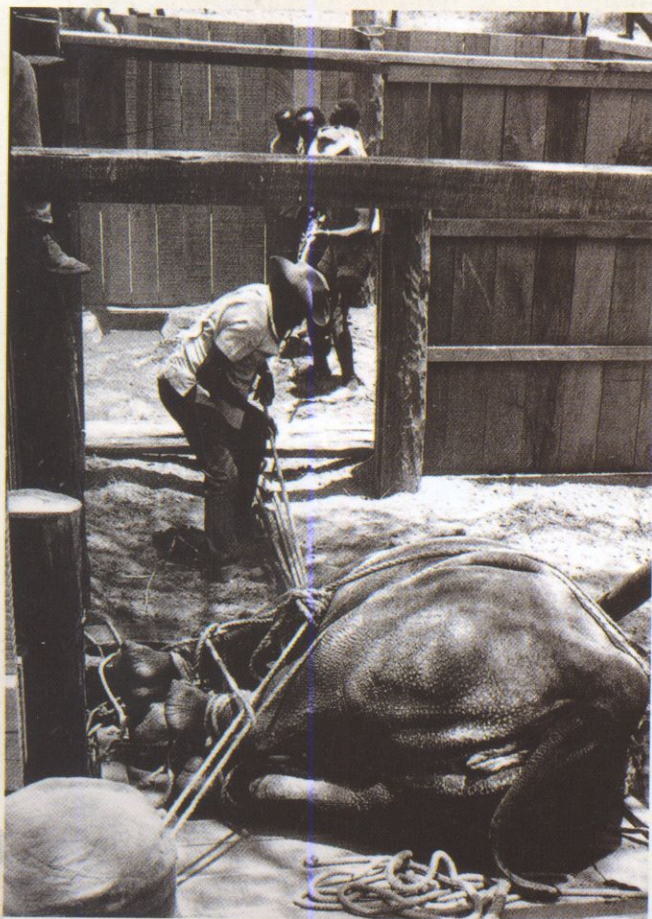
The trackers returned and we piled into

the big Ford, an ancient Land Rover, and an International three-ton truck loaded with gear. Meru guided Tony towards a patch of thorn bush, and suddenly a rhino exploded from it and charged us. As it turned away I prepared to fire the dart gun. Meru, who had been standing next to me, inadvertently moved into my line of fire. My father's early lessons in firearms safety came to the fore and prevented a disaster.

There was a general kerfuffle as we sorted ourselves out, and set off after the rhino. It had not gone far. I stood directly behind Tony and he drove straight through everything. Shooting at a moving target from a wildly bucking truck is not easy. We got within five yards and I fired. The dart emerged from the gun, powered by a pair of carbon dioxide cylinders, struck the rhino square in the backside and bounced off into the grass without even penetrating his hide.

There was no point in continuing. Tony headed for Nairobi to track down a better dart gun and I returned to Meru and a couple of days of more mundane tasks. We agreed to continue on Thursday.

Two days later, armed with a new gun, which propelled darts with enough force to penetrate



Moving the sled with the captured rhino into the boma.

the target's hide, we set out again. We came close to two rhino and put darts into both of them but, for some reason, neither worked. At last we made our first capture. After all the struggles it was a huge relief, to see the rhino being tranquilized by the dart. Tony, Mwaniki, Meru and Alexander piled out like a swarm of angry bees and soon had ropes around the rhino bull's feet, effectively hobbling him.

Confronted close up by my first downed black rhino, I did not know what to expect. Would the drugs kill him? Would he wake up and create havoc? I had to check the rhino's heart rate, temperature and breathing. I couldn't gauge his breathing by using a stethoscope through the thick crinkled hide, so I simply put my hand in front of his upper nostril and began to count.

"How's he doing, Jerry?" asked Tony, looking over at me from where he stood directing the approaching three-ton lorry.

"Seems fine. Breathing at 16 breaths per minute. Heart rate of 60. He's covered in ticks. I'll try to collect some." I spoke with more confidence than I felt.

The next step was to take the rhino sled off the truck, roll the trussed animal on to the sled, and then winch the whole thing up special ramps after we had secured him even more thoroughly. We also laid his head on an old tire and covered his open upper eye with a bit of sacking, after I had instilled some drops into it to protect it from sunlight, insects and dust.

The next two hours were spent doing a sort of slow-motion bull riding exercise in the back of the truck, as Mwaniki drove us back across country.

We dragged the sled off the truck bed and into the newly constructed pens. We then removed the ropes and I gave an antidote into the vein in the ear. "Is everybody out of the way? Watch out!"

In a flash the rhino was up and showing its considerable displeasure with the new situation. I stood on the top wall of the pen and gawked at my new patient. A success!

Within a few days of that first capture we had a visitor. We could hear the sonorous clapping of wooden bells before we could see anything. A group of dun-coloured camels wandered slowly by with a tall, scantily-dressed old man accompanying them. His coiffure and the oddly-shaped neck stool that he carried in one hand told me he was a Turkana.

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about his camels. I told him that we were catching and translocating rhino. "Rhino!" he said with obvious contempt, turning his head and spitting vigorously. "They are bad news. They run through my animals and frighten them. I've had to kill two of them when they came too close." He brandished his long spear and demonstrated a thrusting motion.

The next few days brought us a couple more successes, but it was slow going, and on many days we saw nothing. One day as I came to the camp I was surprised to see a little red-and-white helicopter parked near the camp. A sign on its side read "AutAir Helicopters."

Tony greeted me. "Jerry, we've decided to try using a helicopter for searching and darting. I'd like you to meet Andy Neal. He's our pilot. That's his machine over there." Andy, round-faced and solidly built, half stood and shook my hand. The next morning Tony and Andy headed off in the helicopter on a spotting expedition. They took off and sloped away to the east. I stood with the crew, waiting for their return. Within half an hour, we heard the characteristic whop-whop of the blades before we saw the aircraft. It landed. They had spotted a bull rhino. As the mechanic poured some fuel into the tanks, Andy led me through the essential safety procedures.

I climbed in and sat on the floor, the passenger seat having been removed, and securely strapped myself in with a jury-rigged harness. I taped my spare darts into the cab, and we were airborne.

By now I had learned that a darted rhino may take several minutes to fall asleep, depending on the placement of the dart and the dosage used. We soon saw the rhino. "Wait a moment," Andy said. "I'll try and manoeuvre him away from that hill and those rough rocks. Then I should be able to get you in for a shot."

I aimed for the animal's left rump and took my shot, but something caused the machine to veer, and the dart sped across the rhino's backside and buried itself in the ground just beyond him. I grabbed another dart and, as Andy turned round and climbed, I inserted it into the gun. Within about 40 seconds we had managed a good shot and the dart stuck.

Andy climbed away so as not to further disturb our patient. "Tony, this is Andy. Do you read? Over."



Unloading the sled off the truck.

"Andy. This is Tony. Reading you loud and clear. Any luck? Over."

"We've got an animal darted. A male. I'll make a wide circle around him and we'll keep an eye on him. Can you see us yet?"

Six minutes later Tony's old Ford crept rather slowly out of a grove of flat-topped thorn trees. On the back were half a dozen members of the capture crew.

The Ford drove up to the now-docile rhino and Mwaniki dropped the noose over its head. As the rope tightened, the rhino fell onto his side. Tony leaped out of the cab, running towards the rhino with ropes in his hands. Meru, Alexander and Mwaniki followed. They tied the animal's legs and pulled him over. Andy and I landed in the helicopter nearby.

By the fifth day we had another bull and a cow and calf in camp.

We sat around the fire one evening and reviewed our progress. I told them I would be taking a six-week leave with my wife Jo and then moving to Nanyuki to try to set up my own private veterinary practice. They didn't think they would be capturing any more rhino before I was back in the area. "What happens to these animals?" I asked.

"We're taking these ones to Meru park for release, once we have them settled," said Tony. They held the rhino in a stout boma for about a month while they acclimatized to captivity. Then they trained the rhino to enter a crate without harming themselves. They cut truckloads of thorn bush every day as feed. They cleaned the pens daily. They were eventually loaded on to another truck and taken to Meru National Park.

To be continued...