

First Buffalo

Do you remember your first kiss? I mean a real kiss. Not one of those cheek grazing, lip brushing, air kisses into nothingness and nowhere. Do you remember your first bicycle? Your first motor car? I must confess I have a much clearer memory of my first car than my first kiss.

My first kiss came quite unexpectedly at the age of 13 after walking a trim, young, blonde haired girl back from a Friday night bop in Knysna one Christmas vac. I had only met her that afternoon, had danced with her once or twice – you still danced with one person at a time in those days – and, when I dropped her off at her front door, I was suddenly grabbed and properly kissed. To be honest, I was so inexperienced, so taken aback, half embarrassed because I was not sure what to do, how to behave or how to kiss her back, that I can't pretend I enjoyed the novel experience.

My first motor car was completely different. After completing my compulsory military service, I went to work for the controversial Sammy Collins at Marine Diamond Corporation off the Namibian Coast as a geological surveyor. We worked 12 hours a day for seven days, followed by 12 hours a night for seven nights and were then flown back to Cape Town for six days – effectively our accumulated three weekends. I made enough money before I went to Varsity to pay cash for my little, white, 1 000cc Ford Anglia with its blue plastic seats. Real cash, in notes I kept in one of my mom's biscuit tins. Remember those Anglias with their characteristic, inward slanting rear windows?

Looking back, so many of those firsts are still fresh, clean and clear in my memory, although I have realized as I have grown older that my memory can and has played tricks on me and, when I compare them to those who were also present, our recollections sometimes differ. To try and remedy this

occasional fault, I have consulted my old friend, Derek Carstens, who was the one who initiated my very first buffalo hunt.



Derek Carsten on the left and Peter Flack with the latter's small, immature, soft-bossed first buffalo bull specially chosen for him by his PH, John Varty.

As an Anglo American trainee manager, he was one of the first to be invited to visit Londolozi in the South African Lowveld bordering Kruger National Park and to test drive their new photographic safari camp. As such, when they branched out and started offering hunting packages instead of paying people to cull their surplus game, he was one of the first to hear about this and soon shared the information with me and two other friends, John Oosthuizen, still the senior professional hunter at Hunters & Guides, Africa and, to this day, one of the foremost buffalo hunting professionals in Africa. The fourth member of the party was the mercurial Curtis George von Goetz III – ex American, carrier based, fighter pilot in Vietnam, ex mayor of the little Texan town of St. Augustine, son of a

Texan state senator, raconteur, guitar player and professional life and soul of every party he ever attended.

While completely different from one another, we had a few things in common. None of us came from hunting and shooting backgrounds. We were all self taught as we had few or no family members to teach us. We had all grown up hunting small or plains game for many years. For the last few years we had gone on annual hunting trips together and got on well. No arguments, no petty jealousies over who shot the biggest or the most. None of that. Simply united by our love of the bush, wildlife, the sheer joy of hunting for hunting's sake and one another's company.

But the buffalo hunt was a stretch both financially and experience-wise. The package included 10 days hunting plus a buffalo, kudu, impala and warthog each and came to R1 650 per package. Sounds ridiculously cheap now but back then I earned R350 per month as an articled clerk in a law firm and, of the others, only Curt, who was employed as the CEO of a small mining equipment joint venture, had the money.

For some years we had sold venison to cover our hunting costs and had quite a regular clientele who bought half and whole carcasses from us. We did some further marketing and, lo and behold, found that if we made biltong from all the meat we shot, the sales could defray costs which, in turn, almost made the hunts affordable but only just. When we found out from the state vet that we could export the biltong from behind the red line once it was break dry, that sealed the deal and we booked the hunts.

Now began a period on intense preparation. We knew nothing. I attacked the books and passed them on to the others. The tales of the early hunters scared us half to death. Buffalo charges, gorings, stampings, bitings and even lickings! Yes, lickings. I read a story somewhere that a buffalo had licked the soles of a tribesman – who had climbed a low hanging tree to escape

– with its rough tongue causing his feet to bleed and the man eventually bled to death. Woah! What had we taken on?

I think I was the first to crack (although I was the only one at that time to own a calibre larger than a .300), and went and paid R550 for a second hand Brno .458 from Rossetenstein's in Johannesburg, which the late Silver Bill Ritchie of Klerksdorp carefully checked out for me and, for next to nothing, smoothed the ramp, polished the bolt, lapped the lugs, fitted a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound trigger, a 1x4-36 Bausch & Lombe scope and ensured the rounds fed smoothly each and every time. I think Derek was the next and he bought an open sighted Parker Hale .458.

We all began running and gyming regularly except Curt for whom exercise, other than strengthening his beer lifting arm, was an anathema. The endomorph we called him.

We also spoke to anyone who we thought knew anything about buffalo and how to hunt them. I clearly remember the advice of one of the senior partners in our law firm. He sat on the board of the National Parks and his wife owned a farm in Timbavati not far from Londolozi. When I heard what he had to say, I nearly cancelled my hunt there and then.



A buffalo hunt in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. From left to right: Lou Hallamore, John Oosthuizen, Major, Derek Carstens, Peter Flack, Simon Gwenzi and a local farm worker.

“When a buffalo comes for you, you have to kill it outright,” he said. “Shooting it in the chest is not going to stop it. You have to turn out the lights. Shoot it in the brain. This is very difficult to do while it is running at you,” he added, “because the head is bobbing around all over the place. You have to wait until it is almost on you. At this stage it will lower its head to hook you with its horns. It’s then that you must remain calm, wait for the right moment, shoot down on it, into the spine, behind the boss and jump aside as it falls.”

Really? I tied a squash bull to a piece of nylon hanging from a shooting stand at the old Germiston Shooting Range, set it bobbing and tried to hit it with my .458 at 20 paces. No go. 15 paces. No joy. Ten paces. Still no success. I resolved there and then to never pull the trigger on a buffalo unless I was absolutely, categorically, 100% certain I was going to kill it because I had proved to myself that, if things came to

a charge, the buffalo was going to win hands down every time.

And so it was that Robert Ruark's advice of stalking as close as possible to a buffalo and then stalking another ten paces closer, resonated with me. I convinced myself that there were lots of buffalo but only one me. If I spooked the buffalo by trying to get too close, then so be it. Let it run away. There were lots of buffalo. I would just try again until I eventually outwitted one. Of course, putting this into practice was another story altogether.

I must admit the preparation for the hunt was a lot of fun. Discussing everything with one another. Clothing, hats, boots, binos, ammo, ammo slides, knives, sheaths, back-up handguns, on and on and on. We analysed the pros and cons of everything in minute detail except for Curt who, a little older than the rest of us, usually looked on in benign amusement as he opened another beer.

I was and remain a fan of solid bullets for use on thick skinned, dangerous game, my views probably shaped by the virtual absence, in those days, of the premium, soft-nosed bullets available today. Of course, over the intervening years I have listened to all the arguments of solids versus softs and the concerns that a solid may penetrate an animal and kill or wound an unseen one behind but I just cannot find it in me to shoot one of these behemoths with a soft.

I have always subscribed to the bigger is better philosophy when it comes to calibres and bullet weights for buffalo and, although I have long since sold my .458 and its replacement, a 460 Weatherby Magnum, which I acquired when I started to hunt elephants, I still use a .416 Rigby on Cape buffalo.

The overriding concern, however, must be that you are able to handle and shoot the bigger calibres well and with confidence and have proved this to yourself time and time again by regular practice on the shooting range and in the veld on non-

dangerous game before starting on the things that can stand on you or chew you. It is most definitely not the time to experiment with calibres and cartridges on your first buffalo hunt.

The early practice I put in before that buffalo hunt has long since become the norm for me before the start of each hunting season, even now, well over 35 years later. At the time, I practiced sitting, kneeling, lying and offhand again and again driven by the fear that, when the time came, I might muff the shot and end up with a wounded buffalo on my hands. Since then, I have realised that, for me at any rate, confidence is a big part of any shooting success I have had. If I have confidence in myself and my equipment before the start of the hunting season, I can and do hunt and shoot much better than is otherwise the case.



My second buffalo with my tracker, William or Phiri Phiri, as he was known. I was able to choose this bull myself in Timbavati in the early 1980s. It is fully mature, has a hard boss and the spread measured just over 40 inches.

The day duly arrived and I noticed that, as we came closer to Londolosi, the four of us became quieter and quieter. The realisation was sinking in. The former high spirited jokes and laughter at the beginning of the trip ceased. There was a literal girding of the loins. The time for jokes and preparation was over.

It came as a bit of a surprise, however, despite the fact that the four of us were spending more money over the next ten days than the rest of the people in the photographic safari camp put together, that we were accommodated in the old camp away from the main one and made to feel slightly undesirable. The photographic safari goers had priority. They could go where they wanted but we could only go where they were not. If our paths crossed accidentally en route, we were told to hide our rifles away. Even so, it was not enough to dampen our spirits and we drew straws to see who would hunt first and with whom. Curt won the right to shoot the first buffalo and hunted with Johnny and Map Ives as their PH. Derek came second and he and I were in the same team with John Varty as our PH.

As we tracked through the dry tree savannah that first morning I knew one thing for certain. I was not at home relaxing in front of the TV. I could see everything, hear everything, smell everything. My senses were all on high alert. I felt totally alive and in the present. Gradually, as the day wore on, familiarity bred, if not exactly contempt, then certainly a less heightened sense of anxiousness and thank Heavens for that!

By day three Curt was bored and decided to stay in camp to drink beer and read his book. Johnny, keen as mustard as always when it came to things buffalo, found a small herd of dagga boys with Map, went back to camp and fetched Curt who walked up and shot the biggest buffalo of the trip, a superb, mature, hard-bossed bull measuring 42 inches across the spread, before returning to camp and his still cold beer.

Meanwhile, Derek and I soldiered on. One day melted into the next. I started to feel I was getting the hang of this buffalo hunting game. Up before dawn. A cup of coffee and rusks around the fire. Out in the early morning chill. Shivering from the cold and anticipation. Trudging on fresh tracks. Believing we could tell how fresh they were, what sex and how big the buff were that made them, to our tracker, Elmon's, great amusement no doubt although he was too much of a gentleman to let us know. Was today going to be the day? The ever present optimism of the hunter.

I think I even managed to create an impression of nonchalance. Or at least superficially so, what with my Ruger Red Hawk .44 revolver hanging from its shoulder holster underneath me left armpit. I felt quite macho at times and wished that some of the girls from the office could see me now, all sunburnt and gung-ho. What I did not tell anyone then was that I had bought the handgun after having a recurring nightmare of being knocked over by a buffalo, losing my rifle and being dragged helplessly along the ground screaming as the bus-bodied beast horned and trampled me.

Then, as often happens in hunting, just when Derek and I were beginning to think we would both be going home empty handed, things changed in the blink of an eye. He shot his buffalo and suddenly it was me in the front seat of the open Landrover. Looking back, I remember a commotion as we walked on the tracks along the side of a low rise. The buffalo stood sideways on about 50 paces away, slightly above us and partially obscured by vegetation. Derek fired and then so did Varty. The buff ran out of sight but, when we arrived at the top of the rise, the buff was down and dying on the other side. Of course there were the obligatory coup de grace shots because it had been drummed into us that it was the "dead" ones that killed you and because it was just so good to be able to pull the trigger, smell the cordite and know that, for at least one of us, he had come through this rite of passage,

this ordeal, in one piece.

I remember this hunt for two particular reasons. The first was that Varty's shot had hit the buffalo about an inch from the top of the back in the middle and he claimed that, but for his shot, the buff would probably have got away. I remember Derek and I just looking wordlessly at one another, saying nothing but thinking the same thing – "What an arsehole!" The second thing I remember thinking was that it was my turn now and, if I needed reminding, my pulse rate was doing that for me.



A classic, hard-bossed, mature buffalo bull from Kenya, embodying everything someone looks for in such a bull, although this one is still young and should be left alone to breed. Photo courtesy of Murray Grant

I have no clear recollection of the first part of my buffalo hunt other than Elmon leading us into a stand of shade trees in the early afternoon. From the signals which passed between he and Varty, I was aware that something was up but neither shared any information with me. Next I became aware of a

barnyard smell I have always since associated with buffalo and then the sight of vague, dark shapes wending through the bushes like partially obscured lighthouses – now you see them, now you don't.

"There are a line of buffalo heading towards us," Varty whispered in my ear. "Get ready," he said as we looked down a narrow avenue through the bush. "I will tell you which one to shoot," he added.

Strangely enough, I felt absolutely calm as I sat with my elbows on my knees with the rifle butt resting comfortably and firmly in the crook of my shoulder. I had practiced this rest again and again on the range.

"Not that one, not that one, not that one. The next one. Shoot it!" The .458 fired itself as the sights settled one third up from the bottom of the chest in line with the left front leg. I did not hear the shot nor feel the recoil. The next thing Varty was up and haring after the four departing buffalo, which had made a U-turn at the shot and were disappearing in the direction from which they had come. Suddenly I was aware that we were in the middle of an extensive herd of buffalo, all scrambling to make themselves scarce and leave the scattered trees surrounding us. Equally suddenly, to our left front, four buffalo appeared from around a big no-name shrub. "Shoot!" yelled Varty loudly. But I couldn't see which one was my buffalo. Varty was not so concerned and opened up with his .416. Off the buffalo ran again with us hot on their heels. I remember thinking, "This is insanity," but ran on anyway and nearly fell over the carcass of a buffalo breathing its last on the ground. "There's your buffalo," announced Varty proudly.

Well, it was most certainly the one I had shot. It had exactly one hole in the left shoulder but there was no sign of Varty's shot. "Did you hit it," I asked. His look of incredulity that he could have missed at such close range said it all. "But then we need to find the one you shot," I said. "We can't

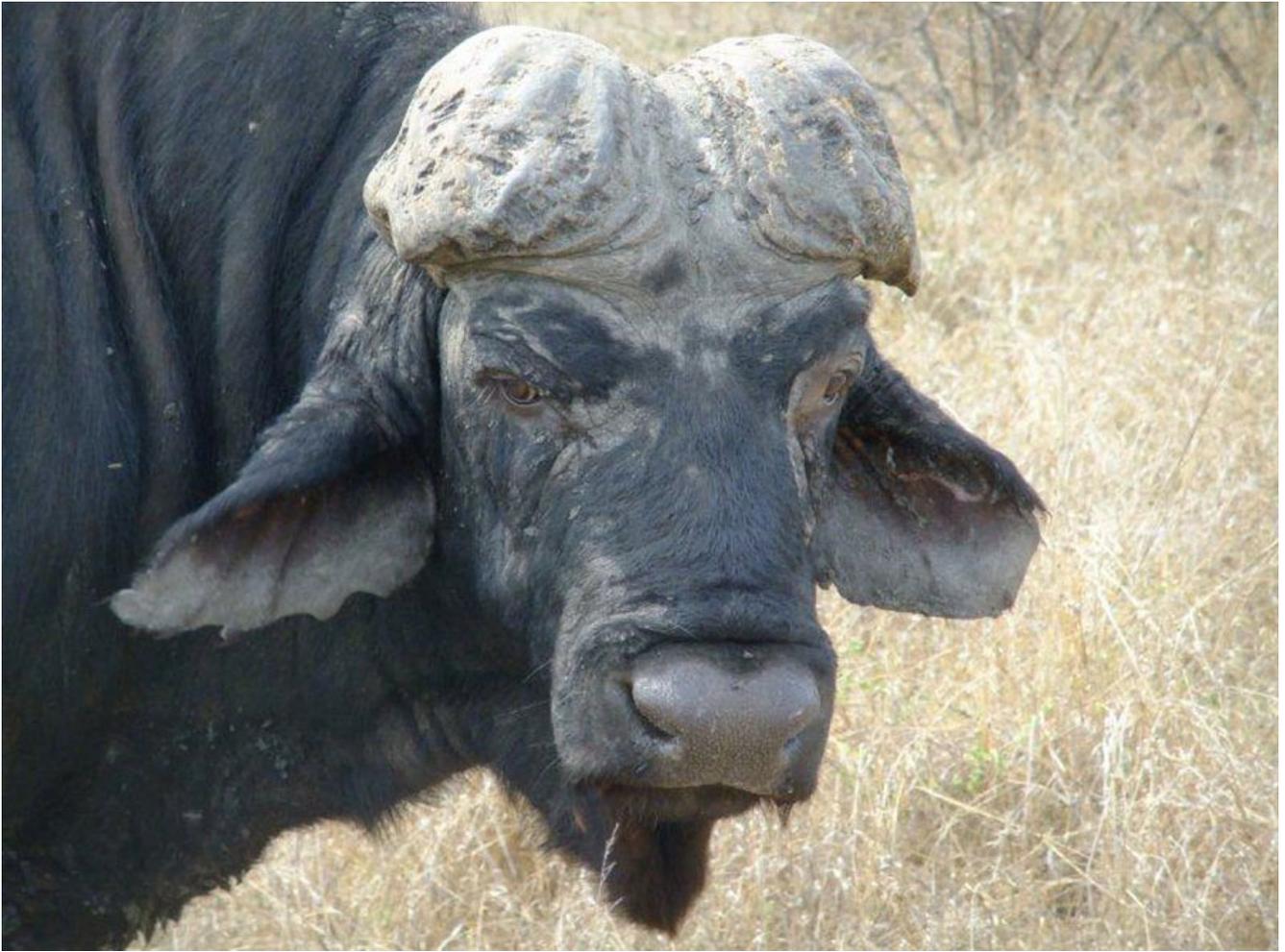
leave your wounded buffalo behind.” “Elmon and I will come back after we have offloaded your bull,” he replied. Whether he did or didn’t, I shall never know for sure but I know what I suspect.

My buffalo was so young and so small I am almost ashamed to mention it. If I knew then what I know now, there are many things I would have done differently on that hunt, including not shooting the soft bossed, immature, young bull that barely measured 32 inches across the spread. But he was and always will be my first buffalo and I cherished him for many years as he saw out his days as a skull mount next to the fire place in our lounge on Bankfontein game ranch.

Footnote: After we had shot all the animals in our packages we made biltong solidly for the next few days – four buffalo, four kudu, four impala, four warthog and one bushbuck. Londolozzi made a large, locked garage available to us, which we hung from floor to ceiling with wires and filled to the brim with the results of our labours. We arranged to return to fetch the biltong – along with our other trophies – once it was all break dry.

To cut a long story short, when we duly arrived in our jointly owned, seventh hand Land Cruiser plus trailer, the biltong fitted into three small cardboard boxes. No-one could or would tell us what had happened to the rest of it. The Vartys were nowhere to be seen. We phoned, we wrote letters, we sent telexes. No reply. Ever.

Curt did mention however that, when he went to Londolozzi to entertain a group of clients shortly after our hunt, delicious game biltong was freely available at the bar and for sale in the curio shop.



Kevin Robertson argues with some justification that scrum cap bulls like this are the most desirable and rare of buffalo trophies. This bull is the exact opposite of the one the author shot on his first buffalo hunt.