Silent Night of Horror

By PH Ernest Dyason

It was around 9.00 p.m. and I was just settling into bed with my Focus on Lion issue of "African Hunting Gazette."

It was a silent July 2012 night, apart from the very distant roar of a lion. Everything was just perfect and peaceful here in South Africa, in the Hoedspruit region.

At about the same, time, but much farther south from me, Frikkie and Sipho (not their real names) were also settling into their shelter made of thorns and branches. Frikkie and Sipho worked for our anti-poaching unit. As we border the greater Kruger Park area, we have real threats from poaching. Earlier the same night two male lions visited their shelter, but they chased them off.

Frikkie killed their cooking fire as they had finished their supper; Sipho had discarded the leftovers over their makeshift fence and relieved himself just before crawling into his sleeping bag. They are supposed to listen for poachers, dogs barking, gunshots, or anything that sounded suspicious, but the night was getting cold, and all was quiet.

As the hours passed and the cold started pressing down from above, both Frikkie and Sipho crawled even deeper into their sleeping bags, covering their heads to stay warm. The embers of the fire were no longer glowing.

At around 3.00 a.m. Frikkie heard muffled sounds as though Sipho was chasing something away, but paid it no heed – so many times during the dark hours they would be awoken by night creatures. Frikkie heard no further sounds, so decided to ask Sipho what was up, but there was no response from him. Frikkie scratched for his flashlight and lit the corner of their shelter where Sipho resided, but there was no Sipho. Alarmed now, he crawled out of his sleeping bag and searched for his co-worker and friend.

In the sidewall of the shelter was Sipho's sleeping bag, torn and partly stuck in the thorns. Frikkie immediately realized that something was seriously wrong and climbed the only tree inside their shelter. Fully awake now, he could hear the lions nearby, squabbling over their kill, and the sounds of bones crunching gave him the chills.

Frikkie radioed for help from the top of the tree, but for Sipho it was too late. The lion had somehow reached into the shelter and gotten a hold of Sipho. It was so quick that Sipho didn't even have a chance to scream. Death must have been excruciating but fast.

The next morning at first light, I was up and preparing for the day's hunt. We were about to leave camp when my cell phone rang. I cursed for not having switched it off but answered anyway, as it was our warden, Mike. He was on the scene with the already growing group of police and investigators. Mike had other business to attend to and asked me if I would report to the local game department's office. I had to obtain an elephant license for an upcoming hunt anyway, so I agreed to drive there.

Upon arrival, I could see that the news had just reached our official's office, as they were preparing some ancient .375 H&H rifles. Our local officer is now rather elderly and suffers from severe gout-like symptoms. I think he was very glad to see me. I was kind of summoned to go and dispatch one of the lions.

Being the kind of cooperative gentleman that I am, I could not decline the summons and asked my client, Walt, if he would mind if we wasted one of his precious hunting days looking for the mankillers. He agreed to even help, if needed.

It took a good hour to get back to camp, grab the necessary rifles and gear, my trusted .458 Lott as well as my scoped .375 H&H, collect John my #1 tracker, and head back to the scene where I was to meet one of the junior game department officials.

At the scene there were so many vehicles and people that it was difficult to ascertain

"All the lions had wanted was food, but what could we have done?"

The man-eating lion had killed the member of the anti-poaching team in the Hoedspruit area of South Africa, pulling him from his sleeping bag inside their shelter while his co-worker slept.

PH Ernest Dyason had asked his client, Walt, if he would mind dedicating some of his precious hunting time to going after the proven maneating lion that had killed a member of the anti-poaching team.

exactly where the lions had gone. Luckily, one of the game rangers from the game reserve had already been driving around looking for the animals.

We teamed up and started on the tracks, or at least where we thought the freshest tracks were. Tracking was not easy in the long grass and thick bush; our nerves were also very tense.

We tracked for a good four hours before we jumped the two male lions. There was no chance at a shot and they disappeared again into the very heavy scrub. At least now I knew where they were lying up, and could make a better plan.

One of my other PHs had taken a zebra during the morning, and I decided to stake out the carcass nearby and use an electronic caller to call them into the bait. Baiting and calling like that for lion in South Africa is not legal, but we were not on a sport hunt. The junior official with us also seemed very relieved by my idea – this would at least get him onto the back of a vehicle and out of the thick vegetation.

We all met again at around 3.30 p.m. I had the zebra carcass and started dragging the bait along a nearby road. The idea was to stake the bait at a crossroads, and then to await last light and use the caller.

In order to get back to the crossroads I had to backtrack with the bait still dragging behind my Cruiser. I turned around and

backtracked the same way but, before I got very far, the lions were already following the drag!

I jumped out of the vehicle and immediately downed the bigger male with my .375. Johan, our other warden, then promptly took a shot at the departing younger male, and I backed him up as quickly as I could. The first lion stayed right where he was downed, but the second ran into the underbrush. The follow-up was tense, but we found him not 30 yards away and finished our task.

A sadness that I could not explain settled upon me and it brought me close to tears. All the lions had wanted was food, but what could we have done? A life was taken, and in today's society this cannot be tolerated.

PH Ernest Dyason resides in South Africa near the small town of Gravelotte, from where he and his wife, Marita, operate Spear Safaris, organizing personalized hunting and photo safaris, primarily in RSA and Zimbabwe. They also arrange and conduct safaris in Mozambique, Tanzania, Cameroon and Benin. Ernest started hunting at age six and is still going strong 39 years later.

Dyason fired at the bigger male with his .375, while game warden Johan, pictured here, aimed at the departing cat.

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