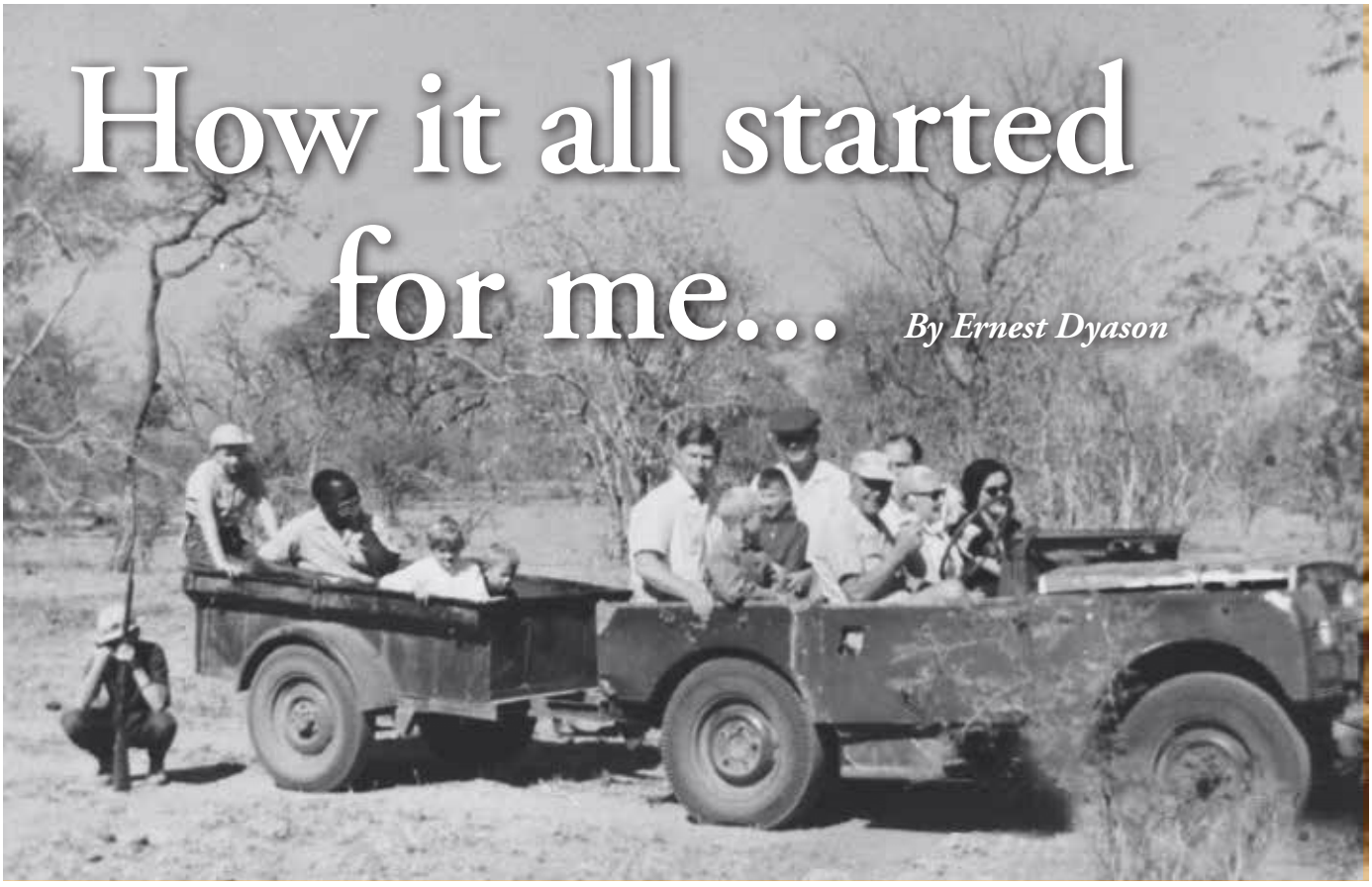
How it all started for me...

By Ernest Dyason



A typical shooting day with the famous old Landy.

I grew up in an era when hunting as a profession was well established but not so well known. In fact, when I was a small kid I did not know you could do it as a "Job".

I have a half-brother who was a professional hunter at the time, the infamous Frank Dyason, but he was a grown man, and me just a very shy little boy. I was referred to as the small boy with the pink feet, as all you ever saw of me, was the bottom of my bare feet, fleeing from anyone unknown to me. I loved the bush and the solitariness of it.

As a child growing up on our smallholding in the then Clubview, now Centurion, my passion was going to our game farm, Thornybush in the eastern lowveld region. School holidays were always spent hunting, and just being in the silent wilderness. As kids, we always commented on the "quiet" there, and it was a competition on who could first detect the distant sound of the train, some 40 miles away.

There were no fences yet, and game was not as abundant as it is now. Abundant enough, though, to be able to fill the freezers every winter with biltong and game meat.

My Mom and some of the siblings with a Leopard taken.

We siblings were all given our opportunity to hunt, when we were old enough. Before my time came, the closest I could get to the action was to help butcher the carcasses. Once they were all cut up, I was allowed to collect what cuts I could salvage for my own business, which was selling dried game meat to the local communities back in the city. That and the many doves and guinea fowl I would shoot on a daily basis, supplemented my pocket money of 25 cents per week, very nicely.

I was the late one, and thus the last to be allowed to officially hunt any large animal. Unknown to my parents I had taken shots at many wildebeest with my .22, but never recovered any. If ever my Dad had found out, my behind would have been glowing in the dark.

My oldest full brother was tasked to take me hunting. He must have been around 13 at that time, a good eight years older than me, and very experienced in the hunt. At that stage I think all my siblings were happy for me to take over, as shooting for the pot was a chore.

Up till then I had only been shooting with a .22 so I had to train with the ZiDi (.22 Hornet) with open sights, as that would be the preferred rifle for my first big animal. Shooting at a target was easy, but when the first opportunity arose for me at an impala, about 150 yards away, it just did not happen for me - I clearly remember the sights covering the whole impala.

I got a major chewing out from my older brother for wasting the bullet, and that was that -my opportunity gone.

On another occasion, and I don't remember how many days later, we were just driving in our old Land Rover when we happened upon a warthog, just standing about 20 yards away.

My brother asked me if I wanted to try again. We only had the family's scoped Churchill arms in .270 Win. Mag. with us. There was no hesitation. The rifle barely fitted me, but I shouldered and pulled the trigger, hitting the pig in the neck just behind the skull. The recoil was so severe that it threw me aside.

I was as astonished as was my family, but never admitted to not even aiming. My first "big" game animal was down and I was now the designated shooter. Since then I did a lot of hunting, though very seldom from the old Landy as it was just too much of a hassle to get the thing started. I would wake early in the morning, fetch my tracker and walk from camp, generally finding impala close enough from camp to shoot, get the wheelbarrow and wheel the animal back for butchering.

Me and that first big game animal

The Dyason Siblings.

I also remember wanting to get out further from camp on occasion, but in order to achieve this, I needed the Landy. So, the procedure would be to remove the air filter cover from the carburetor, fill the carburetor with petrol, get the vehicle started, and then drive as fast and as far as possible before running out of fuel, then proceeding from there on foot or follow the same procedure as before if you did not reach a far enough place. My knowledge of mechanics stopped there, and I could never figure out that the fuel pump was kaput.

On one of these escapades I had hardly left the confines of the camp when I drove straight into a lioness on a fresh impala kill. The open Landy stalled and I was stuck facing the lion.

Luckily for me the lion made a hasty departure and I claimed her impala - lucky find for me. I could even get back to camp in time for my Mom's hot tea and homemade rusks.

It was much later in life, maybe when I was around 15 years old that my half-brother Frank, approached me, then running our game lodge and hunting business on Thornybush.

I had to go with him to shoot some impala. Nonplussed, I agreed, but up until then I did not have much contact with him. Unknown to me at the time, he was testing my shooting ability. We just drove around and shot over the front of the Land Rover, not frowned upon in those days. On two occasions Frank offered to get me closer to impala we had spotted, but I declined and just shot quickly, both times dropping the impala in their tracks.

Later in life, over many alcoholic beverages, Frank actually confessed on how impressed he was with my shooting ability for my age, but at the time nothing was said. I was awarded the task of escorting all the local meat hunters that would come from time to time.

That was the first time that I realized that there may be a future in this, and that's how it all started for me.

Ernest and Marita Dyason are the owners of Spear Safaris, based in the Lowveld region of South Africa. Ernest is the main professional hunter and operates mainly in three countries, namely South Africa, Tanzania and Burkina Faso. He has very many fond memories of his upbringing on Thornybush, now a world-renowned Photographic Game Reserve, part of the Greater Kruger system, where he can teach his children about the wildlife.