

# Cometh the Horsemen

Horses have been an indispensable feature of warfare from antiquity, writes TONY CARNIE. In Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park they've joined the war on rhino poaching

WORDS TONY CARNIE PICTURES TONY CARNIE, PROJECT RHINO, PETE HITCHINS AND SUPPLIED



LEFT: Land Rovers were very useful for transport, but could not reach the more remote and densely vegetated areas. Here, game guards and rangers supervise the transport of a white rhino calf. ABOVE: Using horses, field rangers are able to cover about 30 kilometres a day, compared to about ten kilometres when on foot patrol.

Just think of Alexander the Great and his magnificent black steed Bucephalus, Emperor Napoleon and his white Arab stallion Marengo, the 600 ill-fated horsemen who rode into the Valley of Death during the Charge of the Light Brigade. But thanks to mechanisation and the development of more sophisticated combat technologies, the time of the horse has passed – or has it?

For more than six decades, game rangers in what is now the larger Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park

in KwaZulu-Natal have been using horses to track down poachers, or to chase and capture wild animals in landscapes that 4x4s and other noisy vehicles cannot reach.

Nick Steele and Hugh Dent were among the first rangers to employ mounted patrols in the reserve, and discovered that horses help to camouflage the human form, mask the human scent and also get them to places much faster than slogging there on foot.

From the late 1950s onwards, eight mounted units were set up across the flagship Big Five

reserve, establishing a strategic advantage over wildlife poachers, who were unable to outrun horses at full gallop.

Sixty years down the line, however, most of the units have been disbanded – partly due to budget cutbacks and a declining appreciation for the value of horses in the modern era. Unfortunately, the decline of the horse units also came at a time when the reserve was hit by a merciless assault on the historic rhino population.

This is the reserve where the last remnants of Africa's southern white rhino population were rescued from extinction at the turn of the 19th century, and later multiplied gradually to restock the Kruger National Park and wildlife sanctuaries across Southern and East Africa.

During 2007, not a single rhino was poached in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi. But over the last decade, horn poachers have mounted an unprecedented level of attack on KwaZulu-



Natal's rhinos. By 2014, the annual rhino-poaching rate had sky-rocketed to nearly 100, and last year 220 rhinos were slaughtered in the province – most of them in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi.

To repel this wave of poaching, wildlife managers have deployed drones, spotter planes, satellite imagery, sniffer dogs, fence-line sensors and all manner of high-tech gadgetry to keep one step ahead of the intruders.

LEFT: Nick Steele, Graham Root and Mark Astrup were among the pioneers of horse patrols in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi. BELOW: The skulls of scores of dehorned rhinos piled up in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve attest to the scale of the rhino-poaching crisis.



And then, early last year, the reserve started moving 'back to the future' as it were, as rangers began to resuscitate the last-remaining horse units, with financial support from the Project Rhino anti-poaching support group, and private donors and fundraisers. The new generation of riders is led by Sibonelo Zulu, section ranger in charge of the 16 000-hectare Nqumeni section of the 96 000-hectare Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park.

Dressed in camouflage fatigues and riding boots, and mounted on a towering Appaloosa gelding named Orlando, section ranger Sibonelo is a muscular and imposing figure. He has a warm and courteous smile, but there is no mistaking his steely look when he speaks of his determination to expand horse patrols to secure the park against poachers.

Sibonelo believes horses are essential in this

RIGHT: Section ranger Sibonelo Zulu (front) and colleagues (left to right) Senzile Shazi, Phelelani Ntombela, Bonginkosi Langa and Phillie Ngcamu get ready to ride. BELOW: When Gordon Bailey arrived in iMfolozi in 1962, he was posted to a remote wilderness outpost and would ride down to the river to bathe in the late afternoon. In hot weather, his horse Spartacus would join him for a dip. BELOW RIGHT: Shielded from the sun by wide-brimmed hats, a detachment of riders takes a tea break.



rugged, hilly environment. "Most of my section does not have any roads. So if we rely on foot patrols we can only cover about ten kilometres a day, but with horses we can cover thirty or more. When we hear the sound of a gunshot we can also react much faster on horseback." And speed is essential if rangers are to intercept the hit-and-run poachers before they leave the reserve boundaries, to lie low nearby or escape in waiting vehicles.

"Before Project Rhino came to support us, we only had three horses at Nqumeni section. Now we have seven," says Sibonelo. And there has been a big difference already, thanks to the arrival of the new horses and other security measures.

"Last year, I lost too many rhinos here because we did not have enough horses to patrol properly." For security reasons, Sibonelo is not permitted to disclose numbers, although other sources suggest the rhino-poaching rate in the Nqumeni section has dropped significantly compared to last year.

The revival of the horse unit has been largely due to support from Project Rhino, a non-profit organisation set up specifically to support rhino reserves in the current poaching crisis. Grant Fowlds, the colourful and irrepressible ambassador of the project's Rhino Art campaign, met California-based artist Karrie Hovey in 2015 after a local mountain bike race. And, well, one thing led to another.

"Grant introduced me to some of the rangers in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi and we asked what we could do to support the anti-poaching efforts," says Karrie. "I was thinking more along the lines of technology – drones or something like that. But the rangers said, 'Horses. What we need is horses'. So I asked how much that would cost and when I got back to the States we started to raise money in a crowdfunding campaign."

Through Project Thorn (Tangible Help Our Rhinos Need), Karrie raised more than \$15 000 to purchase several new horses, repair crumbling stables, employ grooms, train riders and ensure the veterinary health of the animals. "It took a bit longer than we hoped

to get going, but it's proving effective and we're hoping that the success of the Nqumeni project can be expanded to other areas."

Grant also met Roxanne Losey, a top California-based jockey to enlist her support to train rangers and acclimatise the new horses to life in the bush. "Roxanne later helped to train some of the horses not to panic at the sight of lions or rhinos," says Grant.

While horses attract less attention than the two-legged species who ride them, there have been several close calls, and some tragedies, over the years. Former game ranger Gordon Bailey, for example, lost two horses to animal attacks in iMfolozi in the early 1960s.

In the first encounter, Gordon was out on patrol in the iVivi Forest when he and a colleague were charged by a black rhino. Gordon fell off his horse and crashed down a slope. His horse reappeared soon afterwards but was mortally injured. The rhino had gored the horse's chest deeply and disembowelled it and Gordon had no choice but to shoot his beloved mount, Cheyenne.

Some years later, another of Gordon's horses broke out of a paddock and was killed by a crocodile while crossing the iMfolozi River. Several decades later, Gordon says he still has nightmares about the time he was nearly eaten by lions while stationed in the iMfolozi wilderness area. He wrote a detailed account of the incident in his recently-published biography *Game Ranging – A life worth living*.

Recalling some of the early history of the reserve's mounted patrol units, Gordon says rangers were never forced to sign up for horse

ABOVE: Ali Campion of Brettonwood Coastal Estate (centre) donated an Appaloosa gelding named Orlando to support the revival of horse patrols in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park. She is with Grant Fowlds of Project Rhino and riding instructor Megan du Plessis. ABOVE RIGHT: California-based artist Karrie Hovey launched a crowdfunding appeal in the United States to bring more horses back on the beat to combat rhino-poaching in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi. RIGHT: Orphans of war. Dozens of black and white rhino calves are being rehabilitated in bomas after losing their mothers to poachers.



duty but, when he arrived at iMfolozi in the early 60s, nearly half the game guards were part of the mounted patrols. "For us, horses were as natural as Land Rovers and I doubt any of us could have imagined our work being done without horses. A regular well-planned patrol system feeds a ranger's general knowledge and instils an awareness of species numbers and animal distribution of an area that technology can add to, but never replace".

Nowadays at Hluhluwe-iMfolozi, Sibonelo notes that he remains wary about taking his horses into areas that lions frequent regularly, especially when the grass is long. But he has noticed that some of the reserve's more dangerous animals seem to be more at ease with horses that are mostly brown or black.

"For some reason the rhinos seem more inclined to chase me if I am riding Orlando, possibly because Orlando has quite a lot of white on him, and so he stands out more than

the darker horses when we are out on patrol. So I have to be more careful when riding him. Some of my horses have become used to lions and no longer show fear – but they are like my babies, and I don't want to take needless risks."

Sibonelo has been riding for several years, but some of his newer colleagues are still gaining experience. For instance, Phillie Ngcamu, currently the sole female rider, only joined the Nqumeni horse unit last November. "Phillie is still learning, but her confidence and skills are growing quickly," says Sibonelo.

But for all the 'growing pains' it seems horse patrols might just be the answer. "I can't speak for the other section rangers," says Sibonelo, "but for me there is no question that horses are essential to protect this reserve." ■

Map reference D8 see inside back cover

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