

Spirit of the
Wilderness

Spirit of the Wilderness

Foreword by Dr Ian Player

Sketches by
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Preface

This book has been long in its gestation. I first started my story in 1994 when I had just completed a master plan for the Bazaruto Archipelago in Mozambique on a particularly blustery day, when a tall coconut palm, bending to the wind, jettisoned a sizeable bunch of green coconuts that landed on the footpath a mere half a metre in front of me. The decision to write my memoirs was made there and then. Eighteen years later, with my story hovering between ‘off’ and ‘on the back burner’, I inadvertently ingested a bee with a spoonful of my lunch of *imfino* (wild spinach). It took two ampoules of antihistamine to get me back from the brink. The bee sting that friendly Dr Peter Iyavoo removed from deep in my larynx was, I hope, the required catalyst for me to complete the book. I have worked most of my adult life with potentially dangerous mega fauna and to succumb to a tiny bee sting sac would have been too bitter a pill to swallow.

Game ranging has played a pivotal part in my life, and rescued my wife Ann and me from a mundane urban existence in Johannesburg. Not only that, but wonderful opportunities opened up for us in the multitudinous fields of nature conservation. My practical background as a toolmaker in Johannesburg was suited to game ranging. At times game ranging is a bit like being a farmer—working with one’s hands is the order of the day.

My late brother John and I were pioneers in the plastics mouldings industry in the early 1950s; our business was provocatively named John Dutton’s Tool Works. When I later found discarded blow moulded cosmetic bottles, embossed with the firm’s new name, Dutton Plastic Engineering (DPE), on the high tide line of the Wild Coast’s pristine beaches, it made the offer of a new and exciting lifestyle in conservation irresistible.

Writer-activist Breyten Breytenbach wrote:

It is better to write one’s memoirs when still young, when one can yet strike resonances from the unknown. Passing time brings only shrivelled yesterdays and bitterness to the tongue.

From *A Season in Paradise*. New York: Persea Books, 1980.

I am nevertheless pleased that I delayed writing my book; this, I hope, has helped me to record more than a string of the reminiscences of a game ranger. Having once been an enforced diarist, recording daily activities as a field man, I have since regarded keeping a diary as a form of punishment. In order to get my pen to flow I resorted

to retrieving distant memories from dusty, dog-eared, black and white photographs, fungus-covered coloured slides and, more recently, digital imagery (with my apologies for not acknowledging unknown photographers).

The expression 'life is a journey and not a destination' applies to the writing of this book, and in my case timing is not of great importance. However, I have been cautious with dates that involve my long association with friend and mentor Ian Player, because of his profound interest in historic events. Hell hath no fury like Ian misquoted! Dilly-dallying has become a sort of evolutionary process which has at last opened a writing niche for me, a combination of conservation and politics. A lot of our conservation endeavours as angry young game rangers in the 1950s were inextricably linked with the politics of the time, and this is still the case. All conservation areas in Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) at that time faced a most vulnerable future; they were constantly under pressure from the Nationalist party who threatened de-proclamation in order to please its constituents.

The public perception is that game ranging is glamorous; however it was not long before I realised that this was a misconception. During my early encounters with fishermen on both the lake and coast I was reviled, sworn at, thrown in the lake and had a burning cigarette butt thrust into my ear. Both the police and magistrates were antagonistic to our cause—a foretaste of what was to come. It came as an unpleasant surprise to find that even those in the leisure business did not understand the ecological sensitivity of St Lucia, and wanted to have the estuary mouth open all year round to satisfy fishing tourists. The result was hypersaline conditions so strong that they eventually starved an aquatic ecosystem of its once rich biodiversity. I hope that the Zululand of today appreciates our earlier conservation efforts. There were, however, some local individuals who believed, like us, in the importance of conservation and they went out of their way to support us. Regrettably they were very much in the minority. I recall in particular Ian Garland from Umtunzini, and Jack Bertram and Campbell McNeillie from the iMfolozi flats.

My original intention was to write this book as if sharing authorship with a remarkable aircraft named *Spirit of the Wilderness*, a Piper Super Cub, ZS-DLI, powered by 150 lively horses. Though I abandoned that idea, it seemed appropriate to give my autobiography the same name as my plane. Both the previous owner, Reverend Harold Stevens from the Mseleni mission hospital in northern Zululand, and I flew this totally reliable plane into and out of some of the wildest places in southern Africa. Most of our occasional mishaps, or in pilot parlance 'incidents', can be attributed to pilot error, fuel starvation, water in the fuel, airstrips that were too short or too wet and collisions with high voltage power lines.

Although voiceless, *Spirit of the Wilderness* has demonstrated its caring by ensuring that I walked away with nary a scratch after each unplanned encounter with terra firma. *Spirit of the Wilderness* has carried a plethora of interesting personalities who have entrusted their lives to me in the quest for environmental and spiritual pursuits. Some of these same people have made contributions to this book.

Flying in *Spirit of the Wilderness* was freedom at its very best—not over-fettered with air navigation regulations; intercom radios were not mandatory; and we could land at international airports or on deserted beaches.

I am delighted to report that all who had the courage to fly with us have lived to tell an entertaining tale. Finding suitable places to land in remote areas can be challenging and comments from some of my passengers range from concerns about questionable appendages held together with eight gauge wire, to my choice of landing strips of marginal length, or strips more suitable for use by waterfowl. These misgivings were always voiced when they were safely on the ground.

When I first joined the Parks Board I did not know a single phrase in the Zulu language to help me establish a working relationship with the game guards assigned to me. It did not take them long, with their skills at physical and behavioural characterisation, to give me a nickname or *isifengqo*. Not all *isifengqo* were complimentary. Mine, *Mahlomeka*, elicited embarrassed looks when I asked for its meaning. Eventually its meaning emerged as ‘one who is active as a hippo fly’—probably referring to my desire to be involved in all the action, whether clearing fire breaks, fighting fires or chasing poachers. The type of fly they were referring to was either a Tabanid or Tsetse fly, both frenetically active species. I asked colleague Hugh Dent, one of the Board’s best linguists for his opinion on my *isifengqo*: he suggested it meant that I ‘rallied people to my clarion calls’. While I acknowledged the first, obviously I preferred the latter. However, in July 2010, while on a visit to Ndumo Game Reserve I presented myself as *Mahlomeka* to two young black women working in the reception office. They almost fell apart with laughter. Only when they stopped laughing did they tell me that my name meant ‘one who is active as a hippo fly’. How absolutely correct they were ... but I can live with that.

My wife Ann and I enjoyed fourteen halcyon years working in the St Lucia and Ndumo Reserves, where hippos mowed our rough lawns and black rhino quenched their thirst from a birdbath a step away from our bedroom window. Our only form of communication with the outside world then was a hand-cranked telephone—a delight for eavesdropping scandal mongers in the area. I recall a neighbour who when asked to “Please get off the line Mrs van der Merwe” responded with, “I’m not listening!”

In 1972 we moved across the Usuthu River border with Mozambique to work for conservation, where we faced new challenges: first, being a servant of the Portuguese Provincial Government, and not very much later, becoming witness to a revolution that changed 500 years of colonial rule to a Marxist/Leninist regime.

Nowadays, when I return to these wonderful environments and ask: “Why do we not hear hippo snorting and Tonga music coming from the Pongolo River below the Ndumo Game Reserve camp, as we did in 1970?” the stock response is an incredulous “What hippo and what Tonga music?”. At St Lucia the annual mullet run, then, would churn the lake from below our house at Charter’s Creek to the Eastern Shores, waking Ann and I from sleep. When questioned about this event nowadays, locals respond, again, “What mullet run?”

In the early years when I participated in the annual Duzi Canoe Marathon, the riverine Zulu men wore *amabheshu* (an animal skin covering for the buttocks) while Zulu maidens gardened naked to the waist. Canoeists were greeted with friendly calls of, “*Uyaphi umlungu?*” (Where are you going, white man?). Local politics in the valley have since changed this cordial relationship, replacing it with abuse and hurled stones. Fortunately today many of the canoeists are connected with local communities who benefit economically from the race.

“Things were undoubtedly better in those days.” I believe this comment depends upon what niche you fill in society and to which period you are referring. Life was better for me then because I lived in a time when the words hijack, heist and *toi-toi* were unknown in our vocabulary, when South Africa had no stinking and polluting industries, when rivers ran free and clean, and the seas teemed with fish.

In 1990 I formed a company named Dutton Environment to perform environmental consulting work on behalf of a diverse range of clients. This gave me opportunities to travel to most sub-Saharan countries, from the Equatorial forests of Africa to islands in the western Indian and Atlantic oceans. I acquired a belated MSc in Tropical Coastal Management which enhanced my CV, improved my remuneration and allowed me to participate in a number of enriching projects. Flying a small aircraft, apart from helping me with my conservation work throughout southern Africa, became a passion. But it was game ranging which made possible a privileged lifestyle and a *mélange* of experiences, and it is these that I wish to share with the reader, and my sense of awe at having lived them.

Prologue

**The ever-present phenomenon ceases to exist for our senses.
It was a city dweller, or a prisoner, or a blind man suddenly
given his sight, who first noted natural beauty.**

Remy de Gourmont

I was in solitary confinement, in a cell measuring three metres by two. My only view of the sky was through a barred half metre square window set high up in the wall. Through this tiny frame, in the fading light of an afternoon, I caught a fleeting and extraordinary glimpse of a sooty falcon taking a bat in aerial combat. I envied the freedom of this bird, a migrant from the wild shores of the Red Sea to the wetlands near Maputo's notorious Machava prison where I was a political detainee, interned on suspicion of espionage. During weeks of incarceration under a harsh regime, when I sometimes feared that I would never be released, I often gazed intently at this fragment of sky, waiting for an occasional, ephemeral image of beauty in the form of a bird soaring past. A white pelican, greater flamingo, glossy ibis, or another water bird from the nearby wetlands would once in a while glide by, most often at twilight. It was moments like these that helped keep my mind resilient.

Mozambique had changed dramatically since 1972, just two years prior to the end of the Mozambican War of Independence in 1974, when my wife Ann and I had arrived to establish a new life there, following 14 years of service with the Natal Parks Game & Fish Preservation Board. At that time, Maputo was still named Lourenço Marques, or LM for short. This serene Portuguese African city with its broad boulevards shaded by enormous indigenous trees was to be our base of operations and learning a new language was a priority. The prime residential area for the town's wealthy business people was the elite suburb of Somerschild, with breathtaking views across the bay, sufficiently elevated above the torrid *baixa* (lower part of town) to capture the ocean cooled breezes.

Mozambique then was still a Portuguese colony but a bush war in the northern provinces was threatening Portugal's 500 years of colonial tenure, not only in Mozambique but throughout its territories worldwide. The Portuguese in Lourenço Marques were deluding themselves, telling us "*Nos estamos aqui em Moçambique para mais 500 anos*" (We will be in Mozambique for another 500 years). But, being aware of military aircraft arriving late at night from the north, bearing Portuguese soldiers who had been wounded in battle with the liberating army, Frente de Libertação Moçambicana (Frelimo), we were not convinced. We were living at the time in the small hamlet of Catembe, across the bay from Maputo, and travelling to work was a pleasurable ferry ride across the water to the Department of Forestry and Wildlife in the Ministry of Agriculture. We would often stand on the balcony of our rented beach

home and call for “*Um kilo de camarões por favor*” (One kilo of prawns please) from the catch that the local netters were bringing onto the beach.

The Mozambican War of Independence had endured from September 1964 until September 1974, when a ceasefire was declared, followed by a tenuous negotiated independence in 1975. Lourenco Marques was renamed Maputo and had suffered a volte-face: out went capitalism and in came communism, replacing the heady days of pavement restaurants and shoe-polishing Shangaans. In the final weeks of this particular struggle Somerschild lost its *laissez-faire* peaceful personality and its large Portuguese community, averse to the idea of living under a Leninist-Marxist regime, returned to metropolitan Portugal. Somerschild was transformed into a suburb of bristling communications antennas and satellite dishes, in numbers that indicated the various levels of political intrigue that prevailed in Mozambique. The country was suffering post independence stress with communistic ideals failing to feed its people. Dissidents were being sent for re-education in the Soviet *gulag* style and the Mozambique Resistance Movement (Renamo) was spawned. Renamo and Frelimo engaged in a protracted bush and civil war that was to endure for 15 years, from 1977 to 1992.

The 4th March 1982 was a glorious, cloudless, windless day when I boarded the ferry at Catembe for the mainland, together with happy commuters carrying baskets of dried fish, fresh produce and an occasional tethered bleating goat, meat for some festive occasion. I was unaware that the Serviço Nacional de Segurança Popular (SNASP) (the National Peoples Security Service) was looking for me. They had paid an early morning visit to my friend Rita Benz in Maputo, enquiring about my whereabouts. In my naivety I even took the trouble to report to SNASP headquarters, to enquire about their interest in my movements! This drew a blank. It was only later that afternoon when I entered the ministry building that I was confronted by two young men. I was marched off to the office of the Chilean Director of Forestry, Jaime Tohé, who, despite my protestations insisted that I be taken away. Looking over my shoulder as I left his office in handcuffs, I said, “Please inform the Minister that I have been arrested.” Tohé did not do this and I learnt later that he was the cause of my arrest, having supplied false information to SNASP. He took advantage of the fact that I was a South African, and the pilot of a Piper Cub aircraft that I used for photographic aerial surveys for my conservation work throughout Mozambique. He claimed that I was a spy for the CIA and the South African Bureau of State Security, or BOSS.

Tohé had a history of extreme social and political opportunism, having once been part of Chile’s elite landed gentry. He later occupied the post of Minister of Agriculture in that country’s first freely elected communist government. After the CIA murdered President Allende, Tohé fled Chile, seeking political asylum in Algeria. He later came to Mozambique as a forestry adviser for the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). I recognised at once his political opportunism and limited forestry experience – he did not have one decent eucalyptus tree to show for his tenure in Mozambique – but he did have access to substantial Nordic funding. His manipulative intrigues were aimed not

only at other foreign nationals, he even ratted on his own countrymen, many of whom were either jailed in Mozambique or expelled to Chile. He himself eventually returned there, filling the post of Minister of Mines in a new capitalist government. The last I heard he had set his sights on becoming the next president!

I was a reluctant passenger in the back seat of a Russian Lada, racing through Maputo to an unknown destination, seated between two young men armed with miniature automatic weapons. I'm a white knuckled passenger at the best of times and when I attempted to grip the back of the driver's seat to assuage my fear there was a swift response: a smack on the wrists with one of the guns – the gun bearer had thought that I was about to grab the driver. Bad start to an unknown future! I was in the hands of the National Peoples Security Service (SNASP), and soon we entered the gates of the Machava Prison on the outskirts of Maputo. Driving into this Beau Geste like fortress immediately showed why no one had ever escaped from it – and why Portuguese dissidents who did not repent of colonial rule would never forget it.

That particular sweep by SNASP yielded about forty individuals who were now handcuffed and standing in line, facing a wall. Included among the detainees were some illustrious figures, including Machel's private doctor and Professor Jaime Travassos Dias from the veterinary faculty of the university, both of whom occasionally played bridge with staff of the American Embassy. An instructor with Mozambique's national airline, DETA, who had once shown the American ambassador a USA-made flight simulator, housed at Maputo's airport, had also been caught in the frenziedly cast net.

The extent of my naivety can be measured by the fact that, before entering the ministry building, I could easily have dropped off my buffalo leather bag that normally contained my work documents. Unfortunately, that day it held 15 black and white passport-sized photographs of the wildlife department's conservation staff, for their ID documents. The look of pleasure on the face of the individual who emptied the contents onto a table was obvious; this was evidence that I was indeed a South African spy and these were recruits for the National Resistance Movement (Renamo) the force fighting against Frelimo. The die was cast. I was stripped of socks, belt and laces, all potential tools of self destruction. A Rolleiflex 4X4 camera captured a photograph of me from a low angle and with a placard hanging from my neck, showing the number 1127. Little wonder that criminals look guilty even before they stand accused in the dock. I was the only white detainee in the cell on that first day. Unlike in our South African prisons where one would fear for one's safety, in Machava I found no hostility towards me from my fellow prisoners. I learnt that a local man had spent four years in prison, without trial, for giving the glad eye to the wife of a commandant of the military.

I believed I was being shown consideration the following day when I was given a cell entirely to myself. The thought of solitary confinement was far from my mind. Rather, I thought: I've done so much for these Mozambican people, it must be some dreadful mistake; I should be out a few days. A few days passed with daily interrogations. Certain fellow victims of the purge were released and some were expelled from the

country. I was accused of having CIA connections in the American Embassy, because photographs showed me entering their building in downtown Maputo. I declared the former to be untrue but the latter correct, as I often sourced from the Embassy teaching material in the form of films and posters, for our conservation training project in Parque Nacional da Gorongosa. In any case, the photograph that was shown to me in the final stages of the interrogations was not of me!

Reportage in the South African press at the time suggested that "Mr Dutton's downfall could have been his friendship with a woman employed at the American Embassy in Maputo". The friendship referred to was in fact with an undersecretary by the name of Jimmy Kolker who, although operatives don't normally have CIA displayed on their sweatshirts, declaring themselves agents in that service, might very well have been one. He often accompanied me and friends on visits to various conservation areas, and had showed his appreciation by giving me a telephoto lens for my Pentax camera, which I had added to the inventory of the Department of Wildlife. This 'bribe' came up in the early interrogations, an indication that someone with whom I worked had leaked the information to the Ministry of Security. Fortunately Dr Armando Rosinha, who was the director of the wildlife section at the time, found the original inventory note which was provided to quash the charges against me. Mozambique had deteriorated into a sorry world of tittle-tattlers who worked for meagre political and financial rewards. It was not surprised to hear my interrogators reminding me that I had enjoyed a glass of wine and a hamburger with some foreign delegation, and trotting out other useless information about some or other function in Maputo.

DISMAY OVER ARREST OF GAME RANGER

Daily News Reporter

CONSERVATIONISTS in Natal have been shocked by news of the arrest in Maputo of Mr Paul Dutton following the Defence Force strike against African National Congress bases near Maputo last month.

Mr Dutton was one of Natal's best-known conservationists and a former warden of the Ndumu Game Reserve on Natal's far northern border. He was employed by Mozambique conservation authorities since the early seventies.

News of Mr Dutton's arrest became known this weekend after the Frelimo Government displayed several "CIA collaborators" to more than 100 foreign newsmen in Maputo to show "how the CIA works".

No answer was given on the whereabouts of several foreign nationals arrested following claims by Frelimo that the CIA had been involved in helping the Defence Force with the raid against the ANC

bases. Mr Dutton was one of those arrested.

Internationally recognised South African ecologist Dr Ken Tinley, said today he was shocked and distressed by Mr Dutton's arrest.

"I am sure there has been a terrible mistake. I have known Paul for 23 years and I cannot believe that he would involve himself in politics. He had dedicated his life to conservation and was totally apolitical."

Dr Tinley said Mr Dutton had done extremely valuable work in Mozambique by advocating conservation as a resource for the people and by drawing attention to its cultural value.

He had also done a lot of work on buffalo in the Zambezi delta.

Inquiries made by The Daily News indicate that Mr Dutton's downfall could have been his friendship with a woman employed at the American Embassy in Maputo.

Reportage of my arrest in the South African press.