

2021 - Another busy year for Big5Protection!

Stranded as I currently am, on a remote island off the coast of Mozambique, I might hope to have time to allow myself to be bored, but alas no and I wouldn't have it any other way. I've read two books already; first time for a few years. It's great to have few distractions other than rationing out work related projects through the day, such as completing reports, writing proposals and quotes for next year and now developing new concepts in training and operations for the future. It's a curse - too much time on my hands and my head fills with ideas, mainly how things can be improved, and I start planning and writing.

My priority is to plan and write up the outline for a patrol leaders' course, where I propose to include the new and up and coming young talent, too young to be leaders just yet, but to develop them as instructors at the same time. Most of the lessons are the same, just that the 'instructors' will focus on making and delivering lesson plans, whilst the leaders set about their orders and command tasks. With two course instructors (and Portuguese translators), this is entirely workable, it probably just hasn't been thought of before. This is typical of the way we approach our work. We disregard what's been done before, further disregard the 'this is how we did it in the military' and evaluate the best way to develop the students to get to where they need to be - to do what they need to do.

We've never run the same course twice. We start with a clean sheet, so to speak, and build from scratch. I dread the day a park manager asks me for a detailed daily program at the start of a course. I'll provide that at the end of the course, included in the report. What I will have, is an outline of the subjects that need to be covered and the sequence to cover those subjects, in a way that the rangers or scouts can follow and grasp, whether they've been educated or not. I don't have timings. Africa doesn't have timings....

Without digressing further and to get into the core aim of reflecting back over the year, I have to recall being at home last Christmas and New Year as a blur of over-indulgence of homemade wine and good food, and thinking, "You're going to suffer back in the bush, but what the hell; it's been a long and busy year!" and 2020 certainly was.

ZAMBIA January - March 2021

Come the 9th of January, I was off and headed for Lusaka in Zambia and then by light aircraft for a few hours' flight into the park. I met up with Rab, the first time we'd worked together since we'd served in the same Squadron, probably 20 or more years before. I'd met up with Rab again, a few months previously in Kenya, when Chris and I were running a female ranger course and invited him to Zambia. We ran refresher training together and then I branched off to run tracking courses, while Rab turned his hand to leadership, before returning to Kenya, while I continued with the tracking.

MALAWI March - April 2021

Without taking a breath, I said goodbye to the good folk at the park and launched straight into Malawi. Not without the now expected travel angst though, as my original booked flight was cancelled, leaving me no option but to take a private chartered plane, costing a small fortune and I was never given a refund on the original booking. This would be a

common theme as we navigated our way through the year: another year of Covid restrictions, frustrations and barriers.

But Malawi was important. We were working with donor funding. We'd developed and had made bespoke kit and had it all shipped out from the UK. Our 5 donors from the US were meant to fly out to view and participate in the course, but Covid restrictions put paid to that. I met with my trusted friend and training partner, Paul, and we set about sorting kit and the program for the first official Long Range Patrol Group (LRPG) course. Paul and I had run the first concept course in Zimbabwe a few years earlier and we were satisfied we were on to something. A different approach to training rangers, a different approach to the role of securing the parks, looking at it in a different way. Details of the LRPG concept and course are on the website to peruse. We were wholly satisfied with the outcomes of the course and justly proud of the achievements of the 13 rangers who qualified.

I wrote daily newsletters to our donors to keep them abreast of developments - it was the least I could do, it was their generosity and confidence in our new concept that allowed us to get it off the ground. Years of planning and delays had gone into this.

ZAMBIA April - July 2021

Back to the same park but with a different mission. We were delivering a Basic Field Ranger (BFR) course over three months. Chris had already deployed, whilst Paul and I were in Malawi. He had the onerous task of getting everything organised and set up and starting to bond with the local instructors we'd be working with. This he did, with his usual positive attitude and resourcefulness and I was thankful he was there - in at the deep end.

In Lusaka, Paul and I met with Shaun, who had flown out from the UK to work with Paul in another park, where they were to run a series of refresher courses for the entire scout force (Rangers are referred to as 'scouts' in Zambia). We shared the same light aircraft, which dropped me off first and then continued its journey to deliver Paul and Shaun. We were getting to know the pilot, Veronica, quite well. A young black Zambian and an excellent pilot. We had an amusing encounter when we were sitting outside a Malawi airport, waiting to be processed through by immigration. We had another young male pilot, a friend of Veronica's, with us, who was keeping her company for the long return flight to Zambia. Eventually, one of the immigration guys approached us, bristling with importance. He came expectantly to me and asked, "Who is the pilot?" I just pointed at Veronica, who was sat next to me. He took a step backwards, looking between the other guy and myself and asked, "Well who is in charge?" He just couldn't comprehend the situation, but it gave us a chuckle and I was smug on Veronica's behalf.

Don't get us started on Immigration! Paul and I have been tested to our limits this year. In Zambia we needed *Temporary Work Permits*, but the lady who was responsible for stamping them in the airport wasn't there. We were told we could come back tomorrow. Which we couldn't as Veronica was on the pan, waiting for us! This started a series of events, spanning our entire three months, too many to describe, but highlighting the utter ineptitude and hopelessness of officialdom in Africa. More than once this year, I've proclaimed, "I'm packing it all in." Covid restrictions, coupled with unfeasibly pointless regulations costing us time and money, inability to sort things online due to weak connectivity and lost airfares and hotel bookings. I've had to resort to paying to 'smooth

the way' several times. I swear when I eventually retire, I'll never set foot in another airport, let alone Africa. But... I say that every year.

When I arrived in the park, Chris was pleased to see me. We've always worked well together. He, Paul and I were in the Parachute Regiment together in the 1980's, in the specialist reconnaissance 'Patrols Platoon'. They both ended up joining the police force (as it was known then), specialising within elite units; Chris in an undercover role: infiltrating criminal gangs, before completely re-hashing the selection and training for new candidates. Paul ended up in SO19, the Met's specialist firearms and Counter Terrorist unit. I stayed in the army but moved on from the Parachute Regiment.

My outline plan for the course was to break it down into phases, starting with the Selection Phase and then three further phases. Phase 1 prioritised Law Enforcement and Zambian legislation with Human Rights, crime scene management, statement writing, and all the subjects Chris thrives on for some odd reason. Drill, patrolling skills, basic weapon handling, navigation and communications were blended in, in a progressive way.

For Phase 2, Chris left, and Paul joined me, as did our affiliated medical company: 'Austere Medical', with Dr Charles and Paramedic Sarah. Phase 2 was a month for medical and tracking training, along with more weapon handling. The course was split with half doing medical training and the others tracking and then swapping after two weeks.

Phase 3 was heavy on live firing ranges and patrolling. Drill, lessons on wildlife & conservation and other relevant subjects were ongoing throughout the course with guest trainers and speakers being brought in, often giving their briefing late into the evenings. Something our local instructors were keen on, was having the students kept under constant pressure by singing and dancing until late in the evening and starting again well before first light. This ensured that we, as tired trainers, got a maximum of 4 hours fitful sleep in our tiny tents. The end results were 17 male and 18 female scouts, trained, motivated and champing at the bit to get stuck in to protecting the park. All hit the ground running as Level 3 trackers, one of the most relevant skills for conservation Law Enforcement.

BENIN September - October 2021

I Finally returned home to Herefordshire from Zambia. This was via 11 days in Croatia, avoiding the UK Covid lockdown but not before a string of shifting goal posts: changing flights and lost hotel fees in Malta. I was able to catch up with the special people in my life, as well as home jobs and personal admin and I thoroughly loved the mid-summer days in my hillside cottage.

In next to no time, I was back on another long-haul flight to Benin in West Africa. There's a lot of bad stuff ongoing in Benin, with Islamic terrorism spilling over from Burkina Faso and armed snatch squads on motorcycles looking for hostages, plus police posts being attacked and weapons stolen. I was running a tracking course for the rangers, including a handful I'd trained a few years previously with Paul and Shane. As Benin is a Francophone country, I needed a French translator, who was provided by the park. The immediate issue was the numbers presented for training and the fact that the extra

instructor I'd been promised, wasn't amongst the trained guys from the other park. The other problem was the fresh, long grass everywhere. Long grass is very bad for training trackers. It's too easy, so I had to be creative about making it hard and challenging for the trackers when we did the practical exercises.

What was sad, but good for the training, was that a bull elephant was shot by poachers just a few kilometres from the headquarters but only discovered a few days later. I took the opportunity to quickly brief the class on the search procedures for such an incident and we then deployed to conduct a thorough search of the site. We found the poachers exit point and a team followed up. The poachers were long gone with the tusks, the legs severed at the knees, ears and tongue cut away but found lying, still at the scene. Unfortunately, after a couple of kilometres, the trackers reported that they'd lost the track amongst the trampling of the local cattle herds. Overall, the course was successful, and 24 students achieved either level 3 or level 4 certificates, dependent on if this was their first or second course.

On my way out, I spent the night in the capital, Cotonou, where I was again subject to the delights of ministerial efficiency, when one of the park's office staff toted me around 5 different ministries, trying to sort out something to do with my Covid test. Each was the same; a rundown building with people sat around in offices or next to doors quietly staring into mobile phones with nothing much to do. Plenty of shiny Land Cruisers parked outside though.....

MALAWI October - November 2021

There was no work to do in Malawi, but I needed somewhere to hang out until my next paid work materialised. I'd hoped to visit our Long Range Patrol Group in Majete for a brief visit but various things got in the way and I didn't make it. However, I was not going to miss seeing my favourite park manager, Lynn Clifford, who manages Thuma Forrest and Dedsa-Salima National Parks. Lynn is a machine in the way she gets things done and deals with almost day to day crises, pretty much single handed. If it's not escaped elephants, it's badly injured or dying rangers or local people gored by buffalos, as happened while I was there. But when I arrived, she downed tools and, with a volunteer from the park, we headed off to visit some of her friends at Lake Malawi. Any down time is useful to me and I made use of the slithers of WIFI to catch up with admin. This time of year is the busiest for poaching and so there was limited training I could do, as the rangers were all deployed.

On the move again, I took the bus from Lilongwe to Blantyre for my flight. Taking the bus saved me about \$100 in a taxi. I soon wished I hadn't. It was just another travel nightmare. The bus hit a car and we were stopped by the police for an hour and a half which put us into the evening traffic, and I missed the slot to get my Covid test at the hospital. This meant when I was tested the following day, I wouldn't have the results in time for my flight because of delays in the overnight processing. Until that is, I found someone who knew someone who's brother worked at the laboratory and guess what? For an additional \$100 to 'smooth the way' I would be guaranteed the results by 9pm that night.

MOZAMBIQUE November - January 2022

This was a new one for Paul and myself. The task was to deliver two courses of coxswain training and a boarding and tactics course for the marine ranger unit operating within an archipelago of islands, off the coast, protecting the marine environment. We were based on Bazaruto Island. Our chums from Austere Medical, Charles and Maxim would deliver refresher training and a full medical course before our 'boaty' stuff kicked off. Pullmayra, of Brazilian decent, whom we discovered as a volunteer in Zimbabwe, came with us to do the translating.

I admit I had to do some revision myself, as it's been many years since I was involved in maritime operations and driving, and later developing all manner of small boats. I downloaded manuals for the specific Yamaha outboard engines in use and refreshed on the naming of boat parts, safety kit and the national 'Rules of the Road'. The practical side was no problem as I could draw from memory and plenty of years of experience at the helm and recall the tactics we developed and used in my old unit.

All the coxswains and rangers we trained were experienced and proficient in what they were used to dealing with, to the point where they were into a pretty relaxed routine so Paul and I pushed their boundaries a little and introduced skills and procedures that they might need when things aren't quite as sedate as they generally are around the islands. Paul took care of the arresting, building containment and prisoner handling, while I concentrated on briefings and the orders process, navigation with GPSs, methods of infiltration by sea, and general cross training of seamanship. The medics in the group, having just attended the medical course, covered all medical training.

Having started with the usual clean sheet, with no course program, we were very pleased with the course outcomes on Bazaruto and were able to write student reports indicating those with potential for leadership and instructor development, which lead nicely into the proposed courses for the New Year...

IN SUMMARY...

Reflecting on the past year and looking ahead to the immediate future (alone on my island base on Christmas day), all outcomes have proven satisfactory. There have been highs and lows, successes and frustrations, hardships and pleasures but never a dull moment.

The face of conservation is ever changing in Africa. Over the last few days and reading in the news even today, I see that Islamic Terrorism is on the increase in and around Benin, where I was just a few weeks ago. Military and Law enforcement units and outposts in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are being raided with many killed and all these countries border the parks I have been operating in. In Kenya there is a rise in the killing of both rangers and park staff, by aggressive cattle herders; encouraged by politicians and government officials. In Botswana, the increase in rhino poaching is so intense, that there is now a program to extract the few black rhino that remain and to give up on the original operation to re-introduce them, which started when I was first involved training their Special Forces in 2015.

For next year? There is always uncertainty other than rumblings and half promises of work. I remain optimistic though. We have been working on new developments in training and operations and I'm hoping that discussions, trials and developments (Covid restrictions willing) can soon start to take shape. We are also working on a program to train a new ranger force and to develop an intelligence capability in the Far East, where endangered species are at a critical point due to excessive poaching and habitat loss. However, above all that, it's my personal intent to reduce the intensity of travel and work commitments for now and to be more home based. As and when the calls come from the parks myself and the B5P team will respond and I'm confident 2022 will be another busy and successful year for all...!