

PH Rudy Lubin and Brooke
ChilversLubin in the mid-1980s at their
safari camp, Chinko Nord, only 60 miles
from the Sudanese border.



The Life of the Wife of the C.A.R. PH

By Brooke ChilversLubin

I was already an adult when I met Rudy Lubin in Paris, so I can only plead insanity for quitting my well-paying job in an international advertising agency, and running off 'to the bush' with a man with a job (professional hunter) to a country I'd never heard of: the Central African Republic.

That was nearly a quarter-century ago, and I haven't looked back, despite the political incorrectness of our life that caused a handful of friends to drop me. They're about the only thing I really miss about the 'other' life I might have led had I not bumped into my colleague – the very public mistress of Rudy's French hunting client, a very public French journalist – who invited me to her caviar soirée. Enter Rudy.

I could never have imagined how magical and challenging life was going to get for me: fragrant showers bathed in moonlight, the nightly serenade of lions, hippos, leopards and hyenas. Even if the fairy tale was marred by political instability, poachers, and some atrociously shot animals, for many years I had a four-million acre backyard.

Africa makes you pay for each minute of bliss with countless hours of discomfort (tsetse flies, sweat bees); boredom (breakdowns, waiting for charter planes or someone to come to the radio); monotony

(certain stretches of certain trails; repeat clients repeating old hunting stories); fear (alone at night in camp with marauding lions, drunks in uniform, bush fires suddenly changing direction); and sheer terror (the hunting vehicle not returning). In C.A.R., my sweetest moments, my dearest recollections were always interrupted by terrific thunderstorms and torrential rains; destroyed by swarms of stinging bees; undermined by an invincible army of ants surging hungrily through the camp; and forever tainted by an airplane crash 23 years ago that left blood-splattered gun cases, blood-soaked clothing and shattered lives.

I began my journey with Rudy in Bangui in October 1984. The first entry in my journal reads: *Shopping list for 12 safaris:* 120 tins of fish; a dozen 50-kg sacks of flour, twice as much taxidermy salt; 10s of boxes of rice, pasta and dried beans; ketchup, vinegar, mustard, margarine, powdered milk, table salt, ground pepper; tinned peas, carrots, mushrooms; 5-litre jugs of cooking

oil, margarine. Four kinds of jams x four per safari x 12 safaris. 120 bottles of booze, demijohns of Portuguese table wine (there is no bad wine, only bad stomachs), stacks of cartons of Coca-Cola and Mocaf beer. Coffee, tea and sugar (European-style) by the case, and 5x as much (African-style) for the staff; ravioli, *cassoulet* and *choucroute* for meatless emergencies. Barrels of diesel fuel and filtering a 10-day supply of potable water. Rudy packed it all to perfection to arrive intact at the end of an impossible journey.

It was my first of (too) many 1,000-km drives from Bangui to our safari camp in the far, uninhabited east-north-east of the country, 250 km from the closest village and a mere 60 km from the Sudanese border. Along the way we haggled for manioc, peanuts and citrus fruits. (The difficulty of obtaining huge amounts of manioc for the staff anywhere within a reasonable distance was yet another logistical nightmare.)

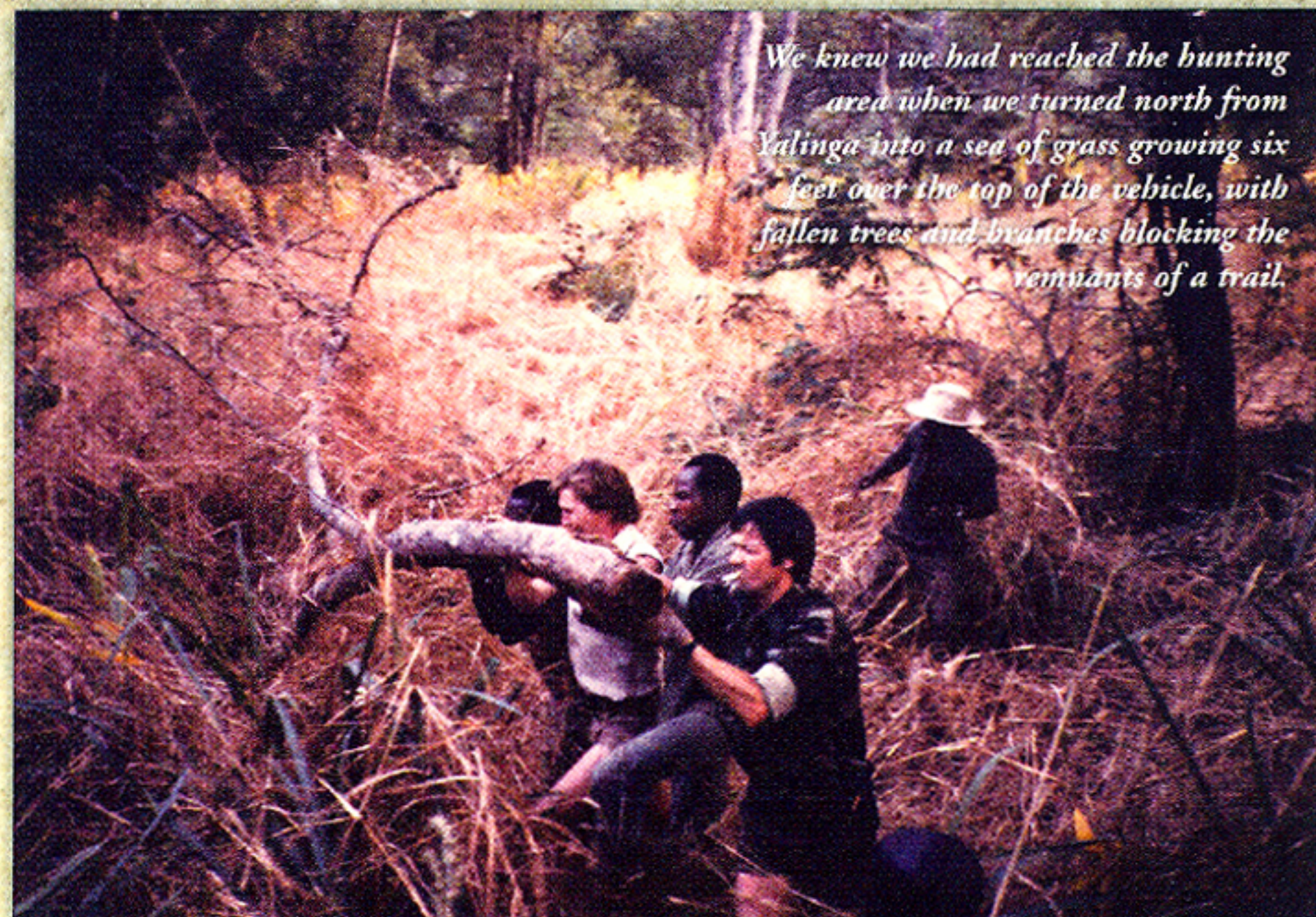
Seven gruelling days on neck-breaking

roads. Only 180 km out of 1,000 were on what remained of a tarred road; the rest of the 'national roadway' was deeply gutted, eroded track. Some days we averaged 10 km an hour. Some bridges I couldn't face crossing in the vehicle... couldn't even bear to watch as Rudy navigated the Land Cruiser over the rotting tree-trunks. I begged God to watch over him... and the Toyota.

You knew you had reached the hunting concession when you entered a sea of grass growing six feet over the top of the vehicle. For three days we knocked down dried and dusty stalks to finally arrive in the overgrown remnants of the camp that had to be rebuilt almost from scratch each year – a Herculean task.

Along the way we made camp in bone-bare village churches or schools, with wide-eyed children and curious women hovering at the edges of our bivouac. Michel, the cook, would negotiate a scrawny but tasty chicken, then grill it slowly in pili-pili sauce, while Rudy led me with the flashlight to a place in the river where the water was clear enough in the starlight to bathe.

I remember one pitch-black night sleeping in the front yard of the last hut in a village, lying in my net-covered single cot, terrified by the unfamiliar scratching, squeaks and sighs so close to my bed. I didn't dare move until dawn when I saw that a baby goat and several chickens had installed themselves underneath my cot! Or the time when the grass rustled and shook in the full moon. I couldn't close my eyes all night, straining to see which foe lingered so near. In the morning, PH Jacques Lemaux announced



We knew we had reached the hunting area when we turned north from Yalinga into a sea of grass growing six feet over the top of the vehicle, with fallen trees and branches blocking the remnants of a trail.

he'd had diarrhoea and had spent the night going back and forth into the bushes.

I didn't know anything back then: not the difference between a shotgun and a rifle, a hartebeest and a kob. But I had brains and curiosity, patience and heart, and every moment in Africa embraced me and still does so today.

All those opening and closing season drives. Maybe, luckily, a lot of it is a blur – my brain deciding it is better to cherish the good and suppress the worst memories. Like the eternal waiting that is Africa: waiting to cross a river with a ferry that may never arrive; waiting for the fellow with the key to the last gas pump between Bria and Juba to show; waiting for the tiniest hint

of singing to be carried on the wind to the camp, announcing a successful hunt and a happy client.

Thank you, my little *balambo* (small stool). With any delay or breakdown, at any of the inevitable unforeseen, I grab my stool and my book and vanish into the painless world of passionate reading. I can get through anything as long as I have a book. Africa is a good teacher.

One year someone stole all the new tyres, and we had three flats in the first 80 km of our expedition. *David Copperfield* saved my life that time. And when the Yalinga bridge (between us and our hunting concession) was out, and we had to cut down and haul entire trees while the villagers just

Each year we returned to Chinko Nord and had to rebuild the safari camp, almost from scratch, with native materials. This was my straw 'boukarou' looking over the river for many safari seasons.



Huntress Diana

In addition to gutted roads and termite-eaten wooden bridges, reaching the forest hunting area meant crossing rivers on precarious barges.



watched, John Updike came to the rescue. In the bush, a good book should be able to sustain you six hours a day: Larry McMurtry. John Irving. Tolstoy.

But when you are beautiful, Africa, you are heartbreakingly beautiful, and we pardon you all your sins, even if you make us pay with an arrow through the heart for the privilege of sharing our destinies with you - that golden calm in the late afternoon, when the 'boys' are framing the huts or trimming the thatched roofs, and the smell of bread baking comes out of the termite hill we call an oven; I love hearing the axes fall, the ibis screeching as they fly up the river, the chimes of Old Ben on the BBC announcing the same news

for 25 years - Kashmir, Palestine, Iran. I walk a little slower in the glow, maybe because ice cubes and whisky are just a shower away.

The garden and the pets made the long months in the bush with just Rudy and the hunter, and an occasional wife or girlfriend, bearable: Boo-Boo my monkey-business monkey and the snake-killing kitten I raised on lion meat; the baby rabbits, orphaned mice, stray squirrels, turtles, pangolin... All buried under the lettuce bed.

I didn't keep chickens until we had an Italian hunter who wouldn't eat game meat. The rooster went into the pot after three midnight wake-up calls. The last hen I kept and named Blanche Neige. She laid one tiny perfect egg. Later, one hunter's wife returned to France and found another pristine egg mixed in with their dirty laundry; it is now a treasure in their trophy room.

We had great clients my first year at Chinko: Roberto de Cesare, Ermano Civalieri whose lovely bride spoke to me in Italian and I answered in French. The lion skins piled up, and each Lord Derby eland was magnificent.

Looking back at years of camp staff, Marcelline stands out the most. It's hard to explain the bond that sometimes develops between black and white women in the bush, when they are the only females and sometimes face danger together alone. One time, when Rudy hadn't returned long after 'lights out' and I lay heartsick in bed, she brought her sleeping roll down to our *boukarou* (hut) and set herself up on the floor, singing sweetly until the vehicle finally arrived in the night. Another time, we sat vigil together in the long hours before dawn, monitoring a nasty hippo fight on the riverside beach below the camp. I don't know what we would have actually done had the two males come charging, wounded and pissed-off, into the middle of the camp, but we felt safer together. I still have the letter from the Scottish doctor who thanked me for the medicines we'd sent, but explaining that Marcelline, after learning she had AIDS (and gonorrhoea and syphilis), had left the clinic in the night and returned to her mother and her village to die. Marcelline - you were strong and full of laughter. God rest your soul!

And Leontine. When she finished her work and saw me still working in the garden, she would come and ask what

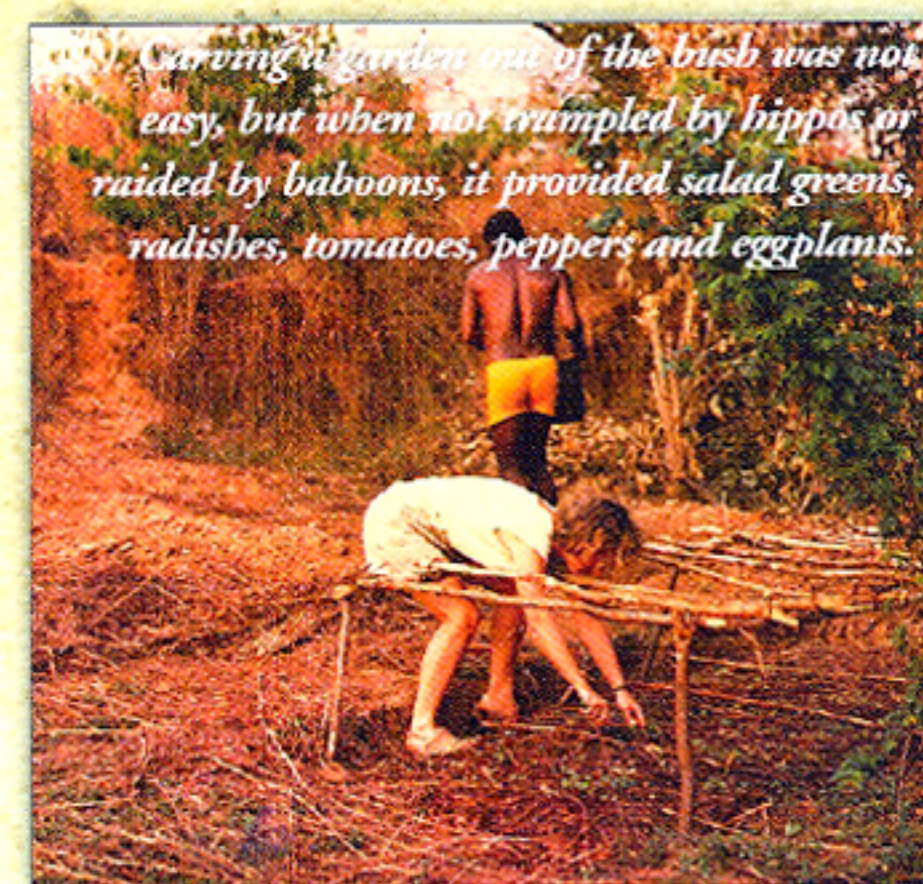
she could do to help. My husband is the only other person in the world who ever asked me that question! I can still picture her in the distance wearing a bright yellow Scarlet O'Hara dress and carrying a parasol. "You tell everyone I'm now the second wife of a Muslim policeman," she announced proudly the last time we met.

And the river. The Chinko river. We must have been out of our minds in those days. I shudder to think of how much time we spent without harm, soaking or swimming after a sweat-drenched siesta; Rudy laying catfish lines at night, as if the razor-sharp oyster shells alone were not enough danger when an 18-foot croc lived only a few k's downstream. Once, while taking my bath in the river, my head full of shampoo, a hippo popped out of the water right next to me, and I went running naked up the beach, calling for Marcelline. Laughing her head off and shouting out the story in Banda for the entire camp to hear, she poured buckets of well water over my head. After the poachers began moving in from the north, leaving carcasses to rot in the river, I contracted bilharzia, and that was that.

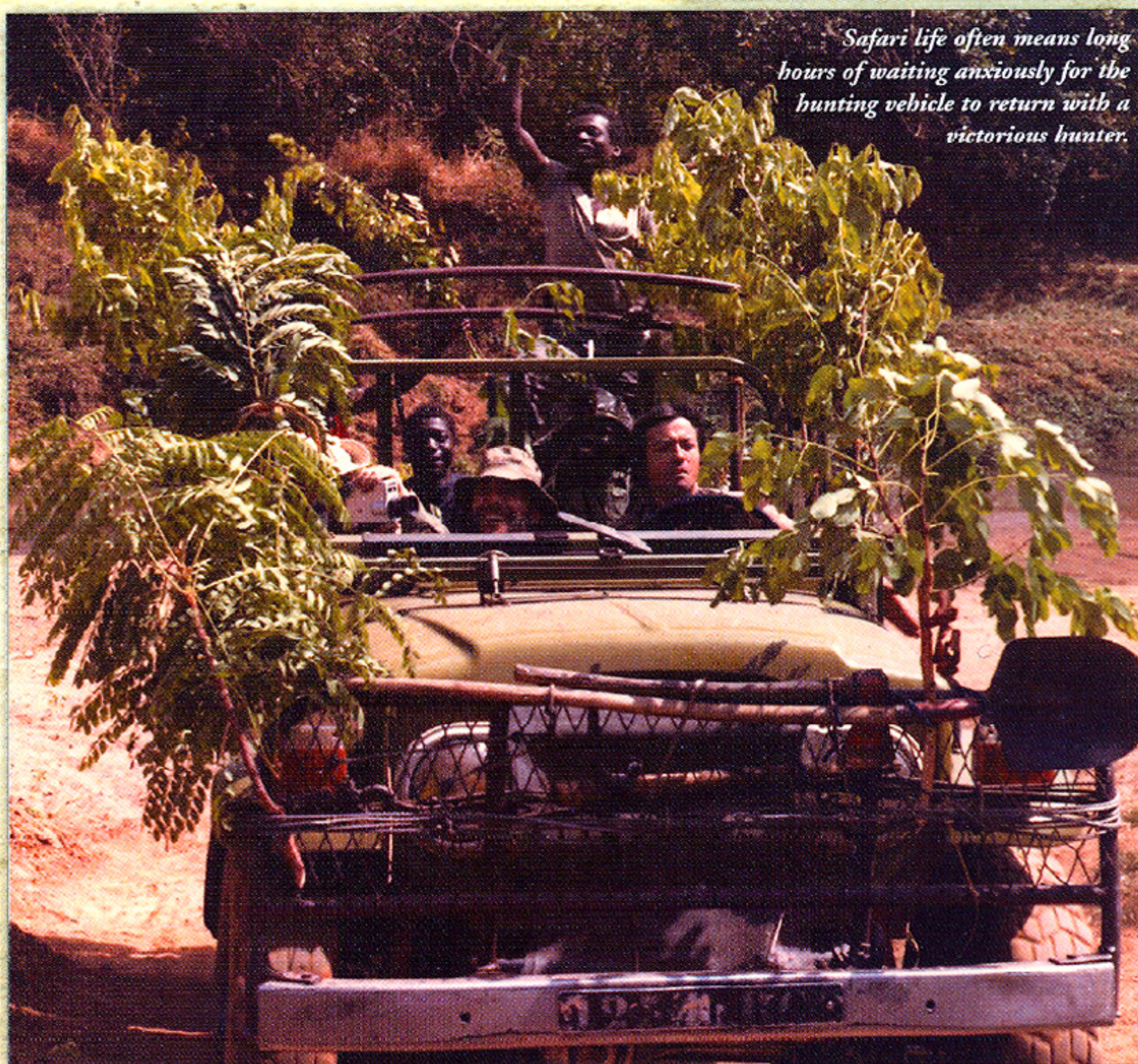
How can Chinko be out of our lives? How could men with guns, donkeys and camels devastate and lay to waste the wildlife in the entire east of a sovereign country to the utter indifference of... all. Rumours say

the poachers are gone, their villages erased from the earth by their enemies from the North. Who knows if it is true? How to go back when all our efforts have returned to bush? Still, I know in my heart that Rudy could find the way to the river with his eyes closed.

Brooke is the editor of ASG and the sporting art columnist for Gray's Sporting Journal. She is a vice-president of International Professional Hunters Association (IPHA), an Honorary Member of The African Professional Hunters' Association (APHA), and a member of the IUCN Antelope Specialist Group. An earlier version of this story first appeared in Hatari magazine.



Carving a garden out of the bush was not easy, but when not trampled by hippos or raided by baboons, it provided salad greens, radishes, tomatoes, peppers and eggplants.



Safari life often means long hours of waiting anxiously for the hunting vehicle to return with a victorious hunter.