

IN FULL FORCE

Braam Malherbe learns some new techniques in advanced field ranger training, to get ahead of poachers

I recently attended an advanced field ranger training programme at the Southern African Wildlife College near Hoedspruit in the Limpopo province. What was extra-special for me was having a one-on-one course with Clive van Rooyen, arguably one of the top instructors in clandestine counter-poaching operations. I always say, if you want to increase your skills and up your game, then find the best to learn from.



I'm privileged to have grown up in the African bush. I'm humbled to have walked alongside legends like my mentor and friend, the late Dr Ian Player. I'm inspired to walk alongside game rangers who, for the most part, eke out a meagre wage while remaining committed to protecting the last of the world's wilderness. That is priceless.

So, what is advanced field ranger training all about? As the name suggests, rangers need to be ahead of poachers at all times—both in technique and knowledge—if we are to win the rhino war. They must be able to react to a dangerous situation with force and confidence. Confidence can only be gained through knowledge and implementation of the knowledge.

My course comprised a number of important components: handgun training, in particular working inside the '10-inch power window'; keeping the weapon close to your body when changing magazines and before firing (your arms are stronger when not extended); automatic weapon usage, including sniper training (day and night); maps, GPS and Google Earth (utilising technology to its maximum);

cover (what cover to use, when); camouflage (understanding what gives you away); firing an automatic weapon while moving toward a target; tracking (this went way beyond spoor identification and included establishing a temporary base without being detected, as well as observation posts); stalking (why it's important to get close to the enemy undetected to gather intelligence); and actual deployment in the bush (putting into practice all that was learnt).

Some of the training I really enjoyed. Back in the day when I was originally trained, GPS didn't exist. I had a compass and a map, usually at 1:50 000. Van Rooyen brought me up to speed by showing why it's important to use every bit of technology at your disposal. "If you're not doing that, be sure the poachers are," he explained. So, he asked me to mark a point on the map, find the co-ordinates and enter them into the GPS. Once done, I had to go into Google Earth and enter the same co-ordinates. Suddenly I had a clear and close-up view of the area. Unlike with the map, I could see the topography, rivers, paths and dwellings in way more detail. Furthermore, I could begin to calculate what the enemy may be doing, where they

may enter, and where their escape route may be. "Intelligence is everything," said Van Rooyen. "Never forget that."

I thought I knew pretty much everything about camouflage and stealth in the bush... until I met Clive! "There are many things to understand about detection and non-detection, but a few of the main points are the four S's and an M: Shadow, Silhouette, Sound, Size and Movement. A strange shadow that's not in line with the area is a dead giveaway. It doesn't help if you're using a tree for cover but your shadow is clearly visible," he explained. "Likewise, a bush hat shaped like a square tin against a broken horizon is a no-no. Always break outlines with camo.

"Talking in the bush while on patrol or while at an OP [observation post] is foolish and dangerous. Sound can give you away—but also [give] the poachers [away]. The more silent you are, the more you'll hear.

"And size is important. Don't walk tall in open ground. Fit in with your terrain. Also, don't move unnecessarily. It's one of the biggest giveaways, especially in the heat of the day. Often, we'll watch giraffes because they're very inquisitive animals. In the heat, animals seek shade and lie low. Only a



human will move in the heat. Poachers want to get their rhino horn and get out of the park as quickly as possible. If the giraffes suddenly all stare in one direction for a period, something is moving. Quite often, it's humans," Van Rooyen added.

The old system of 'fire and movement', while still effective, usually relies on a decent number of people. Let's assume there are four rangers on patrol and they detect poachers. Generally, when closing in on them, persons one and three will rapidly move forward a few metres while persons two and four provide cover fire. Two and four then rush forward while

cover fire is provided by persons one and three. But what happens when there are only two rangers? This is where 'goose step' comes in. Person one moves, taking small, heel-placed steps in order to remain stable, while firing constantly. Person two now out-flanks the poachers, whose heads are clearly down.

Then, it was time for deployment. Van Rooyen and I headed out to our OP late in the afternoon (as the day had been a scorching 44°C with high humidity). We'd established our position on Google Earth earlier; a high point on a small peninsula with a white, sandy riverbed in front of us and a smaller tributary sand bed on our right. Using night-vision monocular and infrared sighting, we took two-hour shifts through the night. No luck that evening.

While on patrol the next day, we walked straight into a young bull elephant. I knew the drill: Speak assertively and raise your weapon above your head; don't shout. The raised weapon creates a shape that the elephant doesn't recognise. We're in the animal's 'critical zone', where it's fight or flight. He came in closer, some 15m. "Nee... nee... nee...," said Van Rooyen. The bull stood his ground, tall and proud, and

then sniffed the ground. He then nonchalantly stepped back a metre and sniffed some leaves. The tension subsided and he moved away. What a special moment!

It's for this reason I do what I do. I'm obligated to protect the incredible, unique biodiversity that has evolved for about 3.4 billion years on Earth. Not only does it teach me fundamental life lessons like the importance of interdependence and the value of respect for all life, but it invites me—as the head of the food chain—to be its protector and not its persecutor. This is one of the key messages I share in my motivational talks.

Thank you to the Southern African Wildlife College and Clive van Rooyen, but mostly, thank you to the men and women on the ground. You're the front line in this rhino war, and I salute you. 🗨️

If you'd like to make a positive contribution toward saving our rhino from extinction, please get a MyPlanet card for free at any Woolworths store. Nominate the MyPlanet Rhino Fund as your beneficiary and know that every time you swipe the card, Woolworths donates money to the fund. Be part of the solution!

OPPOSITE PAGE: Modern tactical combat weapons have moved away from traditional sighting to occluded-eye gunsights—providing improved peripheral vision

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ready for deployment—the gators around the pants legs are for stopping pepper ticks; Charcoal darkens the face, while hessian camouflages the head and rifle; The gun sling allows for easy movement with the rifle at 180 degrees; Kit includes a R1 rifle, range-finder binoculars, infrared night vision, rations and plenty of water