

THANDAMAMBA

Sgt Aaron Nkuna: *Sgt Aaron Nkuna dedicated his life to conservation, spending an exceptional 37 years in the Kruger National Park until his retirement in 2006.*

Sgt Nkuna spent most of this time in the Stolznek section of the Kruger National Park working under the now retired Regional Ranger Mike English. In his retirement speech for Sgt Nkuna Mike recalls an incident in 1981 where Sgt Nkuna together with two other field rangers (Rafael Chiburre and Batista Baloyi) prepare for their daily patrol not knowing what was ahead of them. On this day Sgt Nkuna was shot by one of two armed poachers they confronted on their patrol.

Rafael who was on his way to join his fellow field rangers had noticed a small head of buffalo running away from something, upon investigation he saw two poachers stalking a buffalo, he charged at the Buffalo, who taken by surprise ran in different directions. Rafael managed to chase and apprehend and arrest the poacher without the rifle. By this time the shots had been heard by Sgt Nkuna and Batista from their outpost, they moved quickly to the area from where the shots were heard (with no radio contact) the remaining armed poacher soon realised he was being pursued and entered thick bush, this caused Sgt Nkuna to lose sight of him for a few seconds, he quickly picked up the trail and upon looking up was confronted with a ready rifle. He was shot in the stomach and suffered severe injuries and had to be transported to Nelspruit Hospital. After a month and a half he was back on full duties with Mike English and suffered no ill effects from the shooting and was involved in many poaching arrests after this and until his retirement.

Mike English is very reminiscent about Aaron's many anti-poaching incidents and the remarkable mutual trust between Mike and Aaron remains in place even today.

Aaron has been blessed with 19 children, 18 of which were born while he was in the service of the Kruger National Park and 15 grandchildren. One of his sons has followed in his footsteps and is a field ranger at Stolznek Ranger Post.

(Excerpt from Go Wild February 2007, article by Laura Mukwevho)

Kruger News: Field Ranger retires after 37 years of loyal service

Staff members in KNP were left in awe and respect for the family man who dedicated his life to conservation for thirty seven years. Sergeant Aaron Nkuna is one rare example of the field rangers who were loyal and exposed themselves to areas in which armed poaching existed almost on a daily basis.

A deserving farewell function for Sergeant Aaron Nkuna was held on Saturday, 9 December 2006 at Pretoriuskop Camp. Mr Mike English, the former Regional Ranger in KNP still affectionately calls the field rangers "The unsung Heroes of Conservation" not only in KNP but throughout Africa.

Mike English in the farewell speech he gave recalled one story in particular that happened during the time he was in charge of Stolznek Ranger Post. On 15 August 1981, Sergeant Aaron together with two other field rangers, Rafael Chiburre and Batista Baloyi prepared for their usual days patrols not knowing what laid ahead of them. There were two or four rangers per outpost/picket depending on how long their respective portion of the Park boundary was, for which they were responsible. The ideal situation would have been for the field rangers to cover the whole length of the boundary every day, but this was not always possible. The field rangers would patrol either on foot or on bicycle to pick up any signs of poaching activities, follow them up and also any other important conservation orientated observations or information during these patrols.

On this specific day, Aaron was shot by one of the two armed poachers. One of the field rangers, Rafael Chiburre was on his way to deliver a message to Aaron's fellow field ranger Batista Baloyi when he saw a small herd of buffalo obviously running away from something. He stopped and there he says two poachers stalking a buffalo. Rafael charged at the poachers who ran off in two different directions because he took them by surprise.

He then ran after the poacher who did not carry a rifle and then caught up with the poacher and arrested him. Aaron and Batista then heard the shots when they were still at their outposts before they set off for the day's patrol and they immediately went out to where the shots were coming from. There was no contact for radios in those days. It was not long before they saw the other fleeing armed poacher entering an open area just ahead of them. The poacher then ran away along a game path and realizing Aaron was catching up with him, went into some thick bush and Aaron lost sight of him for a few seconds.

On arriving at a rocky outcrop and where the game path split, Aaron stopped for a moment to check on which direction the poacher had gone instantly picked up the spoor and the direction his quarry had gone. As he looked up to continue the chase, Aaron saw the poacher stand up from behind a bush, not more than 15 meters from him with his rifle ready.

He shot Aaron in the stomach, this poacher had apparently been arrested on a previous occasion for poaching and Aaron was bale to identify him as he turned and flee further. Aaron was badly wounded, bleeding internally and was losing a lot of blood and therefore had to be quickly taken to hospital in Nelspruit for an operation.

The bullet damaged his intestines, missing all the vital organs and gone through his abdomen instead. The field ranger was in hospital for ten days, discharged, stayed at Mr English's quarters while he recovered for 2 weeks and was then ready for light duties. After a month and a half he was back to his normal duties and in the bush again.

Apparently, Aaron suffered no ill effects from the incident and afterwards was involved in several armed poaching arrests until his retirement. Aaron has been blessed with 19 children, 18 were born when he was already working in the Kruger National Park and 15 grandchildren. Ironically one of his sons followed in his father's footsteps and is a field ranger at Stolznek Ranger Post in KNP. When Mike English was reminiscing about Aaron's many anti-poaching incidents at the farewell function, you could see the remarkable mutual trust between the two and could even imagine the kind of working relationship they had.

Mr English continued to say that "there always have been still are and always will be many like them, as long as there are National Parks and Game Reserves". He even quotes Dr U de V Pienaar's statement of KNP Field Rangers in his book about the history of KNP that says "Neem uit die Verlede", "they all made sacrifices some of them the highest sacrifice of all, that of their own lives"

Aaron Nkuna certainly came very close to making the highest sacrifice! We salute him.

(Go Wild, February 2007, article by Laura Mukwevho)