

## Surviving *The Charge*

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Nature photography is an enjoyable pursuit that enriches our lives, but beneath the surface danger threatens. Aware of this we take steps to minimise the risk, put it in a cage and push it to the back of our minds. But sometimes we just can't restrain it. When danger does break out our world can be shaken, our values challenged, our faith tested and we begin to see the world through a fresh pair of eyes. The narrative that follows is about such a time for my wife and I.

Sitting on a small, grey rock, I was looking across the sandy flood plain that spread out before me and I couldn't think of anywhere else that I would rather have been. Distant zebra, rolling in dust, threw up ethereal clouds that were back-lit by the late afternoon sun. A lone bull elephant wandered off towards the horizon as a herd of antelope came into view on my right, accompanied by a couple of ungainly giraffe. What a way to round off a day - relaxing with the splendour of Africa lying at my feet.

Before my first visit to Africa, I was told that it gets into your blood. I dismissed this as overt romanticism, but now I know it's true. There is a smell that is Africa. There is a feeling that is Africa. Most of all, there is a sound that is Africa, which engages the subconscious in a way that defies description. During each day, the cape turtle dove's incessant urging to work harder is heard everywhere. At night, a cacophony of sound populates the darkness. Whether it is the guttural roar of a lion, a baboon's ear-piercing scream as a leopard passes silently by, the mocking whoop of hyena, or the munching and belching of grazing hippo, it is a sound that speaks of wildness and is always calling "come back, come back". And so, it was always only a matter of time before my wife Margaret and I would return to enjoy this wonderful continent once more.

We couldn't sit around forever. Nearing the end of a spectacular trip, we were finishing off with a short walking safari, where we walked each day between small bush camps. This was the icing on the cake. Our compact group consisted of four guests, a scout and an armed guide. Without the protection of a vehicle, we needed to be back in camp before darkness fell. If we didn't, we could suddenly find ourselves on the "a la carte" menu of any passing predator. Reluctantly tearing ourselves away, we fell into line and began heading off to camp. The scout led, followed by our guide, the other two guests, Margaret and then myself.

Enjoying the walk everybody was happy, still savouring the time we had spent at our "sundowner". All was at peace. Suddenly, a loud crashing and tearing noise behind us and to our right grabbed everyone's attention, and we all turned as one. A short distance away, a three-ton female elephant burst out from a small clump of trees and shrubs. Without hesitating for even an instant, she charged our group. Rooted to the spot, we all stared as she thundered towards us. Our guide shouted loudly to try and break her concentration but to no avail. She just kept coming - this lady was not for turning. Margaret was now on my left and my thoughts were only of her safety. Realising that this was really happening and that we were all in serious danger, I moved away from Margaret hoping to draw the elephant away from her. This worked all too well and now I was the centre of attention. As far as I could see there was only one thing left for me to do. With my camera and telephoto lens still around my neck, wearing walking boots, and standing on sandy ground I turned and ran for my life. I ran as fast as my little legs would carry me.

As I ran, I looked back once and saw the other male guest on the floor between the elephants legs. He had also moved to protect his wife. Fortunately for him, the elephant had target-locked on me and he escaped with a good kicking, gathering a nice collection of scrapes, bruises, and aches and pains along the way.





I don't know how many seconds it took, or how far I managed to run, but the elephant soon caught me. She struck me (probably with her trunk) and I stumbled as I ran. Somehow I managed to avoid falling, regain my balance, and keep on running. She struck me again; falling to the floor I rolled and tumbled across the sand. I was lying face down when she hit me again, crushing me into the ground. I felt my bones break and my insides seemed to burst. I lay there unable to move and waited for the next blow, knowing that it would instantly kill me. It never came.

Expert shooting by our guide had halted the elephant's charge. On his third shot, she crashed to the ground alongside me, trapping my legs underneath her head. With my eyes closed and gritting my teeth to fight the pain, I was in my own little world. In this self-imposed darkness, I heard Margaret calling my name. It was a shout; it was a scream. She was the first to get to me, still calling my name, and was quickly followed

by our guide.

My blood mixed with the elephant's as she lay along side me - dying. As her strength ebbed away my legs were supporting more and more of her weight. The pain was excruciating. "If you don't get the elephant off my legs they are going to break!" was about all I could say. Somehow, my diminutive (5' 2") wife and the guide managed to get my legs out from under the elephant.

Struggling to breathe, I knew that my injuries had to be very serious (there are disadvantages to being a trained first-aider). Margaret held my hand as I lay there - expecting to die within the next few minutes. Saying my goodbyes I told her that I loved her.

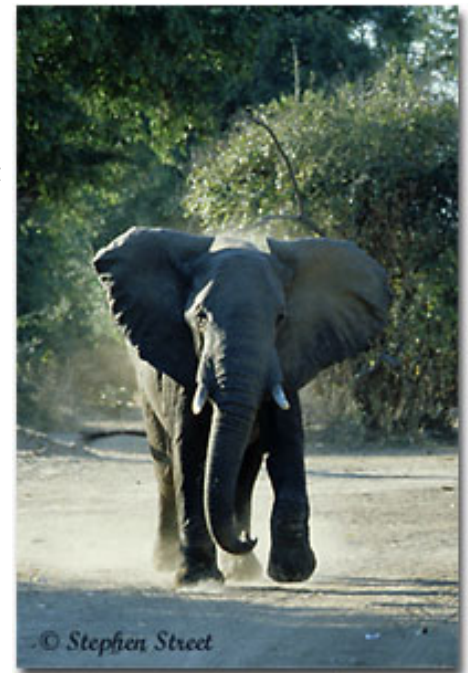
Help arrived very quickly from nearby camps, which had been alerted by the gunshots. Cutting away my clothes, the immediate obvious injuries were dressed as well as they could be. Emergency medical aid was called for but unseasonable storms had grounded all aircraft. Nothing could fly to my aid until the storms abated. Time passed, I kept breathing, darkness fell and all I could do was keep holding Margaret's hand and wait.

Help was on its way. Flying before it was considered truly safe, a paramedic team came to my aid as soon as they could. The poor weather denied them the luxury of a helicopter, so they flew to the nearest bush airstrip. From there they drove out to our remote location, arriving at midnight - about six hours after the attack. I was checked over and prepared for transport to hospital. Transportation was a bumpy drive in a safari vehicle, a short flight in a bush aircraft and a long trip the length of the country in a more substantial plane (without Margaret) followed by another bumpy ride in an ambulance. My hospital check-in card shows an arrival time of 06:08, over twelve hours since the attack. I was ushered into emergency arrivals where I was initially checked over and had various bits of plumbing attached. Surgery was deemed necessary and after being prepared and sedated I was wheeled off to an operating theatre, (Margaret arrived just in time to accompany me as far as the theatre doors). Now the full extent of my injuries could be confirmed; two broken shoulders, six broken and badly displaced ribs, right lung punctured, bleeding from my duodenum, pancreas and liver, and a cracked lower right leg-bone - as well as an uncountable number of cuts and scrapes, ranging in size from one millimetre to eighteen centimetres.

The next time Margaret saw me I was lying in intensive care, tubes appearing from all sorts of places, hooked up to life support and heavily sedated. What a change from twenty four hours earlier!

During the following week my condition slowly deteriorated. I turned a pale shade of yellow and became a little bloated as my kidneys stopped processing liquids. Removal of fluid from my damaged lung was a continuous battle. I would occasionally overflow, and clear, bloodstained liquid would come gushing out of my nose and mouth - threatening to drown me. The doctors who treated me were originally very optimistic but became less so as each day went by. Eventually, on the Saturday following the elephant charge, one week after it had happened "We will do all that we can but we can't promise anything" was the best that they could say. Margaret left the hospital that evening in tears, giving strict instructions that she be contacted, whatever the time, should anything untoward happen.

Following the attack, Margaret had the onerous task of informing our family and friends about what had happened. Five thousand



miles is a long way from home when something like this occurs. One friend who was kept fully up to date was the pastor of our church, who immediately rallied prayer support. With each daily update more people began to pray, and as the news reports of what had happened went global so did the prayer support. On that fateful Saturday evening she called our pastor telling him "I am preparing myself to become a widow", just as he was leaving to attend a multi-church event organised by Teesside Evangelical Alliance. That evening every one of the three hundred people there joined in earnest prayer for my healing.

Despite Margaret's deep anguish and distressed state, exhaustion overtook her and she finally fell asleep. Waking early next morning, she immediately telephoned the hospital to check on my condition. "How is he?" she asked the ward sister. "He's dancing!" was the reply. I was apparently moving my feet in time to music that was being played in the ward.

From this point on my recovery raced along. Over the next two days the fluids in my lung decreased dramatically, I was taken off life-support, my kidneys began to function again and sedative medication was withdrawn. For the first time in nine days, I opened my eyes. I remained in intensive care for another two days, regaining sufficient strength to get out of bed (ably assisted by Margaret and a nurse) for limited periods, and then moved to a "normal" hospital ward. Here I began receiving physiotherapy for my broken bones.



Since my arrival in hospital, I had been under the care of a surgeon and an anaesthetist. Now I was under the direct care of the surgeon. During my first afternoon out of intensive care, the anaesthetist visited me. "What can I do for you?" I asked, "nothing" he replied, "this is purely a social visit, I was passing by and thought I would call in and see you". I started to thank him for all that he had done for me, "Mr. Street" he said "you asked God to heal you and he has, let's just leave it at that." I thanked him anyway.

My surgeon visited me on the following day. After the usual medical talk Margaret told him, "What he would really like is to be out of the hospital". After considering this thoughtfully and asking me where I would be staying he said "We will take another set of x-rays (which had almost become a daily routine) of your lung and if they are perfectly clear, not a single mark on them, I will allow you to leave. However, if there is the

smallest of marks you will continue to stay here." "It's a deal!" I said. A few hours later I walked (slowly) out of the hospital.

So, seven days after being at death's door, not expected to last the night, and after that time of intense prayer for my healing, I was released from hospital.

Before I could leave for home, I had to revisit the hospital once more as an outpatient to be checked over by the surgeon, (and have yet another set of x-rays taken of my chest). Examining the latest results, he showed me a spectacular shot of my broken ribs, which explained why it hurt so much when I laughed. Then came the great news "You can fly home... but not until Saturday", which gave me a further four days of recuperation at the hotel. As I began to express my gratitude to him he stopped me short "You know, I really didn't do much, it was God that did the healing". Once again I insisted on thanking him anyway.

The healing process continued after I returned home, culminating in my return to work (passed as fit) three and a half months after the incident. Praise God!

*About the images...*

Lion jaws - When it comes to visiting Africa and staring death in the face this is what I had in mind. Not dear old Jumbo.  
Canon EOS5, Sigma 100-300, Fuji Sensia 100

Zebra sunset - Zebra really seem to enjoy frolicking in the dust and are incredibly photogenic.  
Canon EOS5, Sigma 500, Fuji Sensia 100

Elephant charge - No, this is not THE elephant that attacked us because, (a) this is a male mock-charging, and (b) the last thing on my mind was taking a photograph!  
Canon EOS5, Sigma 100-300, Fuji Sensia 100

Elephant - Just to show that you can safely approach an elephant on foot... usually. This bull elephant was enjoying a snack of tree

bark for breakfast.

Canon EOS5, Sigma 100-300, Fuji Sensia 100

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