

Part IV:

Bvekenya Barnard

By PH Willem Frost

The story of Stephanus Cecil Rutgert Barnard (better known as "Bvekenya") is told in T.V. Bulpin's fascinating book The Ivory Trail, first published in 1954. Barnard was born in Knysna in 1886 to a family of elephant hunting guides in the surrounding forests.



Stephanus Cecil Rutgert Barnard

Before he was ten years old, however, his father bought a farm in the then Western Transvaal, but then lost all his cattle in the rinderpest of 1896. Three years later the Second War of Independence broke out, and Barnard Senior went on commando with the Boer forces. In 1901 he became a prisoner of war, and in 1902 Mrs. Barnard passed away, leaving young Cecil to take care of the other children. After the war young Barnard was free to do as he pleased as his father had returned and had taken over responsibility for the farm and the family.

Cecil Barnard's dream was to become a professional hunter making a living from hunting elephants. In 1910 he scraped his meagre savings together and bought a wagon, a mule, ten donkeys, camp gear, food, and a couple of rifles, and set off for the village of Makhuleke in Crook's Corner, that very remote stretch of land between the

Levhuvhu and Limpopo Rivers and where the borders of Rhodesia, South Africa and Mozambique met. On the South African side of the Limpopo River the area is now part of the Kruger National Park, and tourists can visit the confluence of the two rivers. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the village of Makhuleke (named after the local Shangaan chief of the time) where one Alec Thompson and William Pye had opened a store (in 1910) to trade in ivory, hides and game skins, food, clothes, ammunition, etc. The foundations of the store can still be seen, but everything else has been knocked down and removed.

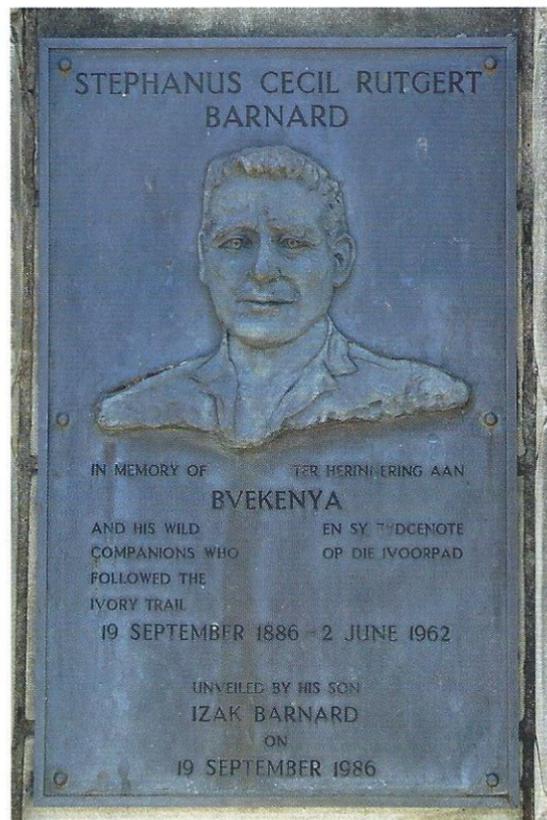
Makhuleke would become Barnard's primary contact point with civilisation in the years to follow. On his first trip into Mozambique Barnard camped at the Save River, but his camp was attacked one night by a group of local Shangaans. Barnard barely escaped with his life. He had not yet

shot any elephant but that night he lost all his money, rifles, clothes, equipment and food. All he had left was his red underpants in which he slept – no shoes either! He walked the 160 miles back to Makhuleke, mostly at night so as to avoid the scorching summer heat. It was during this time that he got his Shangaan name of Bvenkenya ("The one who swaggers as he walks.").

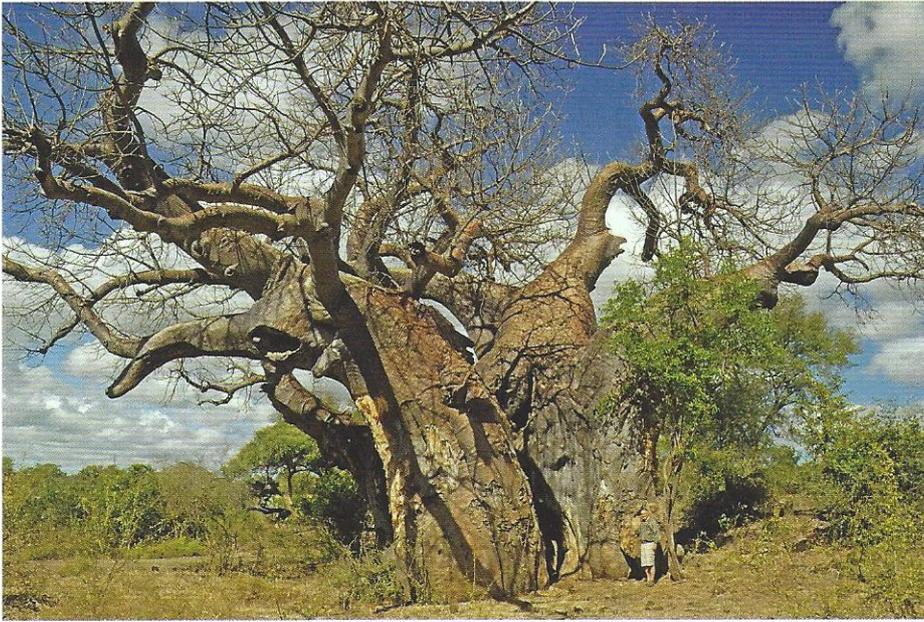
This episode did not put him off; not long afterwards he was back with fresh supplies and a short-barreled 9.5 Manlicher-Schönauer with 500 rounds. His prime hunting field became the land between the Limpopo and Save Rivers in Mozambique, but at times he would also venture into Rhodesia and further into Mozambique. He came to know this country like the back of his hand. His first elephant had fifty-pound tusks, the second seventy-five pounds, and the third sixty pounds. These tusks were carried back to



Memorial for Bvekenya Barnard erected by his son, Izak, in 1986. It is at a remote place in Crook's Corner and is, unfortunately, not accessible by the public. Photo: Willem Frost



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The author at a large Baobab along the old trail from Crook's Corner to the trading post at Makhuleke. Bvekenya Barnard must have travelled down this road quite often, and most probably often rested in the shade of this magnificent tree. It is also possible that he camped here. Photo: Willem Frost



There are still many elephants in and around Crook's Corner. Is it possible that some of these elephants are carrying Dhlulamithi's genes? Photo: Willem Frost

Makhuleke where Thompson paid him 168 pounds for the six tusks. Two days later he was off again across the Limpopo into Mozambique. In the years to follow he made enough money, primarily from ivory, to buy two farms.

It was during one of his early hunts that he first came across an enormous giant of an elephant that dwarfed the rest

of the herd of about 300 animals. Before Bvekenya could get a shot in, the wind swirled, the elephants winded him, and the game was over. Barnard could not forget the giant elephant with the enormous tusks that touched the ground when he walked. It would be many years before his path crossed again with that of *Dhlulamithi*.

The purpose of Bvekenya Barnard's first

excursion into Mozambique was to obtain a licence to hunt elephant, but it was out of season and the Portuguese officials did not want to know anything. Thereafter Barnard did not bother with licences. It was not long before the police of South Africa, Rhodesia and Mozambique were looking for him. Catching him would not be easy, though. He knew the land, was exceptionally bush-wise, and well-connected with the local Shangaans whom he supplied regularly with meat. Only once was he arrested when the Rhodesian police surprised him at Makhuleke. They handcuffed him and walked him all the way back to Fort Victoria. The police had difficulty finding witnesses or evidence of poaching, and in the end he was only charged for shooting a hippo illegally. He was fined and friends happily paid the fine for him. Barnard took revenge by shooting a large number of elephant, hippo, buffalo and antelope on Rhodesian soil.

He must have walked thousands of miles through the wilderness, but did not like to sleep two nights at the same place. He did, however, establish some sort of permanent camp on the banks of the Tshefu River deep in the heart of elephant country and where there were very few Shangaans around. Here he would make biltong and process the hides and skins into thongs, whips and sjamboks - quite a profitable line of business. Other than ammunition, Bvekenya Barnard was not dependent on anything from civilisation. If he really needed something he could send a messenger to Makhuleke or the trading post at Selinda in Rhodesia, some 150-plus miles away.

Later on Bvekenya Barnard did not only hunt. He tried 'black birding' (i.e. illegal recruitment of labour for the South African mines) and farming in the Soutpansberg where he had bought a farm, but hunting remained his real passion. In about 1919 he gave up poaching to pursue a more respectable life as a farmer and a representative of a legal recruitment company. The call of the bush was, however, too strong, and in late 1920s he returned to his old stomping grounds. He also upgraded his rifles. First he tried a .425 but didn't like it. Then he got himself a .465 H&H double, according to him the best rifle he ever used.

It was in November 1929 that he met again near the confluence of the Olifants and Limpopo Rivers. The legendary *Dhlulamithi* was with two other bulls. The smallest bull offered a shot and Bvekenya

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took him with a bullet into the engine room. Then he set off on horseback after the other two stampeding elephants. He got to within fifty yards of the elephants, but could not get a shot in. The elephant were running straight at a Shangaan village and Bvekenya could hear the women screaming in terror. The elephants then saw the hunter on horseback; the smaller one dashed off into the bush but came straight for him. Bvekenya escaped the charge and *Dhlulamithi* also disappeared into the bush.

Bvekenya then set off again on the trail, a game he was experienced in. Many times before he had followed an elephant trail for days on end, living from the bush and sleeping on the trail. A few days later they found the elephants. Bvekenya shot the smaller elephant but it did not go down. He climbed up a tree to get a better view. The elephants were nearing the tree, and as he pulled himself up higher he looked into the eyes of two green mambas coiled up on the branch just above his face. He preferred the elephants to the snakes and dropped like a sack of potatoes out of the

tree, landing on the hindquarters of with his rifle landing on the opposite side of *Dhlulamithi*. The two elephants did not waste time and rushed off. Five miles further on Bvekenya found the wounded one and finished him off. He tracked *Dhlulamithi* for two more days and found him in the shade of a tamboti tree. Barnard got close and looked at the elephant for a long time. He then put his rifle down saying to his Shangaan tracker: "Let him live. I have had my day." That was the end of Bvekenya Barnard's hunting career during which he took hundreds of elephants, as well as buffalo, hippo and other plains game. He went back to civilisation and settled on his farm in the Western Transvaal, got married and raised a fine family. He passed away in 1962 just before his 76th birthday.

The hunting era described in this short series of four articles was obviously very different from hunting in the 21st century. Hunting provided a livelihood for many in an environment where game was abundant and the human footprint still insignificant. It would be easy to accuse those pioneer hunters of over-hunting, but they lived in

different times – times that we can hardly comprehend. To be judgemental serves no purpose. Let's just recognise them for what they were: pioneers in a wild, untamed land and hunters with remarkable skill and courage.

Some of the descendents of those early Boer hunters are still active in the hunting industry as outfitters and professional hunters. When you join them at their campfire, ask them about their history; they may have fascinating tales to tell.

The full story of Bvekenya Barnard's remarkable hunting career is told in T.V. Bulpin's classic book "The Ivory Trail" published in Cape Town by Books of Africa in 1954, second edition in 1967.

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