

Part III:

PJ Pretorius – nearing the end of an era

By PH Willem Frost

PJ (“Philippus Jacobus”) Pretorius was a loner and a restless adventurer who would never be at home in civilisation.



Major PJ Pretorius wearing the leather suit he had made to hunt the impenetrable thickets of the Addo.

He was only sixteen when his father sent him in the early 1890s to Rhodesia as a transport rider. When he was ordered to return home, he refused, and disappeared into Mozambique – it would be a quarter of a century before he saw his family again. He hunted throughout East and Central Africa as well as the Congo; had many narrow escapes from man and beast; could speak several African languages; survived malaria numerous times, and got so sunburnt that he looked more like an Arab than a white man from South Africa. His favorite hunting grounds were at the confluence of the Kafue and Zambezi rivers and along the Rufiji River.

Pretorius is specifically remembered for two remarkable events: the sinking of the German battleship the *Königsberg* during World War I, and the thinning out of the Addo elephants in the Eastern Cape.

At the outbreak of World War I Pretorius

was on the Rovuma River on the border of Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) and German East Africa (Tanzania) preparing for a trans-Africa safari to Liberia. He was quite keen to join the British forces in East Africa as he had had a less than amicable relationship with the German authorities. About a decade earlier he was hunting in the far western districts of German East Africa (nowadays Tanzania), when his party was attacked by a large impi of cannibals. Most of his porters were killed, but Pretorius managed to shoot 47 of the attackers and barely escaped with his life. He was then arrested, murdered and held in prison for almost two years without being charged, which left him livid. During this time he learned to speak German fluently – a capability that later on would be extremely valuable.

The German authorities also confiscated a farm he had bought as well as all his cattle (about 500 head). When he was eventually

released he was virtually penniless and had to start life all over again. He could only afford an 8mm Mauser with which he started hunting elephant in the Rufiji area. The proceeds of the first ivory were used to upgrade to a 9mm. Later on he was refused a hunting licence, but nevertheless continued hunting elephant in German East Africa until he had recouped all his losses. He bought another farm on the Rufiji, but in 1913 the Germans confiscated this as well. Once again Pretorius had to recover his losses by hunting elephant illegally. At this time he lived on another farm he had bought on the Rovuma River in Mozambique from where he hunted the German territory.

Within days after the commencement of war hostilities in East Africa he was wounded in both legs when he and two friends, on their way to join the British forces, ended up in a fight with a German patrol of more than 100 soldiers. He made

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a miraculous escape and, after an incredible journey of almost a month through the bush, made it to the hospital at Fort Johnston in Nyasaland. It took another two months before he could travel again, and he then went back to his parents's farm near Nylstroom in South Africa. He desperately tried to join the South African Army but was refused on suspicion of being a German spy.

At the same time, a British battleship was sunk by the *Königsberg* off the east coast of Africa whereafter the German ship disappeared into thin air. It was suspected that the *Königsberg* was damaged and was hiding in the delta at the mouth of the Rufiji River in German East Africa. None of the British reconnaissance expeditions could, however, find the battleship.

The British admiralty then contacted the South African prime minister with the request to find one PJ Pretorius. When eventually located he was taken down to the naval base at Simonstown where a British admiral gave him his orders. Pretorius knew the Rufiji delta very well, where he also owned a farm, and was fluent

in the local languages as well as German. A destroyer took him to the delta, and he told the commander to pick him up again in exactly one week; if he was not there they should forget about him.

A week later Pretorius was at the rendezvous point; he had found the *Königsberg* where it was hiding under excellent camouflage. Pretorius went back and boarded the *Königsberg* several times to ascertain exact details about the ship's guns and ammunition, crew, etc. During one of these nightly spying missions he saw a German nurse, Emma Nochel, on the ship. He realised that her chances of surviving the coming British assault were very slim. This bothered him a lot as he could not come to terms with killing a woman, even if she were the enemy. So, he did the only thing he could think of: he kidnapped her one night and held her prisoner at his campsite. They soon fell in love, however, and he eventually took her back to the Transvaal where they got married.

The *Königsberg* was destroyed by the British forces and Pretorius became a war hero in many countries. The novelist Lord

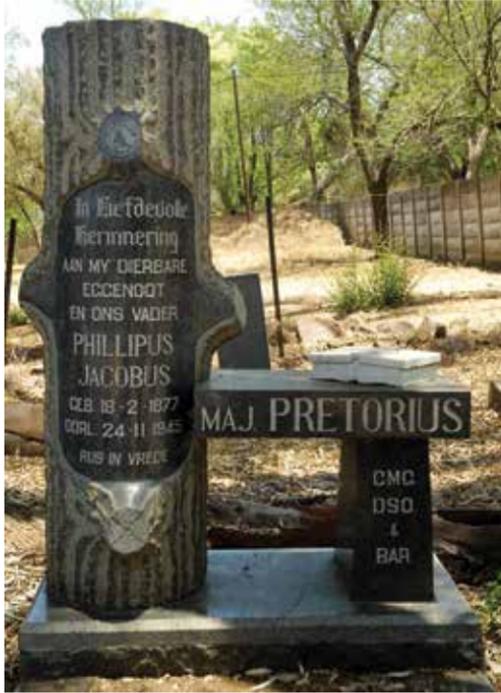


PJ Pretorius with some tusks of elephants he hunted in German East Africa. Photo: Courtesy of Sas Kloppers, Dream Africa Publications.

Tweedsmuir based some of his work on the heroics of Pretorius, and Wilbur Smith also based his book, 'Shout at the Devil' partly on the events at the Rufiji delta. This book was filmed in 1976 with Roger Moore and Lee Marvin in the lead roles – a most enjoyable movie.

In 1920 Pretorius was approached by the Administrator of the Cape Province to thin out the elephants of the Addo bush. These elephants had become a problem: they were raiding the surrounding farms

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The grave of Major PJ Pretorius. He was laid to rest in the Concentration Camp cemetery in Nylstroom. Photo: Willem Frost

“The Addo was also impossible to hunt - extremely dense bush with impenetrable thorn”

and presented a major risk to the people in the area. At first Pretorius was not interested. The Addo elephants were small and those with ivory had only very small tusks. The Addo was also impossible to hunt –extremely dense bush with impenetrable thorn thickets. A number of other well-known hunters (including FC Selous) had been requested over the years to come lend a hand but none saw their way clear for such an impossible assignment. Eventually the government agreed to pay Pretorius for his work and he started hunting the hundred square miles that he called a “Hunter’s Hell”. His rifle was a .475 double.

He tried several methods, but soon decided that the best way to hunt these elephants was to find a herd and then to get them to charge, shooting at close range as many as he could during the charge. Two journalists once timed

him: six elephants in thirty seconds! The terrain was, however, so difficult that it took him almost a year to shoot 120 elephants.

This old nimrod hunted all over central and east Africa and must have covered thousands of miles on foot in pursuit of Africa’s big game. He passed away in his mid-sixties from cancer on his farm in the Waterberg in 1945. ♡

The complete autobiography of PJ Pretorius was published in 2013 by Dream Africa Productions and Publishing. A copy of the book can be ordered from Mr. Sas Kloppers at sask@lantic.net or from matlabas-book-shop.myshopify.com.

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