

SOUTH African born, Perth-based, motoring journalist Bill Buys, is a regular contributor to thecountrydriver.com.

His popular weekly yarns take a light-hearted look at a sometimes crazy world of motoring – and other strange and wonderful stuff – from around the world, nationally, and state wide.

Bill and I were regular pairings on national motoring press launches and have become good friends, but there was a lot to this quietly-spoken, talented man-behind-the-wheel I didn't know, and when I asked him to put together his life story, I was staggered.

Now I know why he never flinched when it was my turn to swap from co-driver to driver!

Bill's own story is fascinating. Enjoy the read – Darryl Starr

EARLY in the piece I figured you come this way but once, so do what you feel like doing.

The result has been a kaleidoscope of occupations and experiences, though writing has been present ever since my schooldays.

I was first published in Autosport in 1956, while I was still at school.

I don't really know how many jobs I've had, but I started off as a transfer clerk in Harry Oppenheimer's Anglo American Corporation, bought my first car (an Autobianchi) during that period, modified it a bit, and went racing.

Then I went to East Africa to work as a field officer for Williamson Diamonds, one of Anglo's many companies.

That was among the most exciting times I've had, cut short by the eruption of a war in neighbouring Congo.

I was about to join the Katangese mercenaries, but my dear mother begged not to go.

So, I went back to Johannesburg instead.

However, that year in Tanganyika remains among my most memorable experiences. One eventful safari in particular.

It was in 1960 in the bush and jungles of Tanganyika and my job as a field officer was to collect samples from depressions in streams and riverbeds as indicated on a big mosaic (aerial photograph) by the camp geologist.

The samples were then sent to Johannesburg for analysis to determine if there was any indication of diamonds in the region.

I had a team of five workers, and we usually went to the specified locations in my Land Rover. But occasionally samples had to be got from remote areas where no vehicle could go.

So, a foot safari was the answer.

One such a trip was in the southern highlands.

Our base camp was on the banks of the Great Ruaha River and I was to get samples from various spots way further upriver, to a point where it was joined by a distant tributary, the Tungamalenga, then follow the Tungamalenga for many kilometres until it reached the roadway leading to our camp.

On Day One we were taken as far as possible in a Landy, then set off on our long footslog.

We hadn't gone more than an hour and were crossing an open plain when I heard the unmistakable snort and whistle of an angry rhino.

And here it came, thundering straight at us from the river side.

I had time to yell 'faro!' to my team, then ran to a lone tree and somehow climbed a few metres up.

Looking back, I saw my lads scatter in all directions, dropping their karais (prospecting pans) and other gear as they fled for their lives.

One, probably on sheer instinct, teetered on a 1m high bush.

Luckily nobody was hurt, and the beast did not come back for a second lunge.

Shaken, we gathered our stuff and continued.

The karais were often worn or carried as headgear, mainly to keep the dreaded tsetse flies from biting their necks.

Towards evening we happened on a remote village, but despite the presence of some chickens and dogs, no people were to be seen.

One of my team then spied one guy peering out from behind a bush and called to him.

Turned out they thought we were a German platoon!

That told me no white person had been there since 1920.

We camped a few kilometres further upstream, and I woke up with something crawling on my face.

By torchlight I saw my mini tent was covered in army ants.

OMG, I'm going to get eaten alive!

I reached for my can of Coopers aerosol, sprayed, and hoped I'd survive.

Well, by some miracle, I did not get a single bite.

Some of the team weren't as lucky as I heard screams, followed by loud splashes as they jumped into the river.

Next morning, we continued, reached the junction of the Tungamalenga and there, on a grassy patch, I found a beautiful green stone.

It looked like no other of that region and our geologist later said it was chlorite schist, often associated with kimberlite, but a lone stone was most unusual.

I still have it. Worthless, but . . .

After another day of trudging along the riverbank we camped, and I put my tiny Palomino one-man tent up against a big baobab and put my ex-British army Hounsfield bed together.

I fell asleep soon after an evening meal and woke with one of my team shouting 'tembo' - elephant.

We'd make a big fire at night, mainly to keep wild animals away.

I peered out of my tent and saw a big bull elephant crossing the Tungamalenga and heading straight for us.

One chap took a burning branch and hurled it at the elephant, but contrary to expectations, the animal flapped its ears, let out a bellow of anger and came charging our way.

My lads fled, but I was frozen in fear in my little metre-high tent.

What followed was two hours of sheer terror. I'd never been so afraid.

The elephant stood less than a metre from my tent and started rubbing against the tree and snapping off branches. The debris fell on the tent's light cover, said to be made of parachute material.

I didn't think the three-tonne elephant would purposely trample me but feared it would simply not see the miniscule tent and walk over it.

I remember unzipping the flyscreen, hoping to sneak out, if possible. But fact is I was so scared I couldn't move.

Then bang! I was down, flattened, I was dead. But in that split second as I went down, I let out my last sound on planet earth. A shrill scream, I imagine.

I was dead for some minutes, realised I could still think, I could still move my fingers. So, the biblical thing about life after death was true.

It took a while for me to realise I'd simply toppled the 10cm off the damned Hounsfield bed.

Its frame structure was probably inspired by Jayne Mansfield lying face down, and I had teetered too close to the edge.

Anyway, whatever sound of agony I emitted worked. The elephant was gone.

There was more terror to come.

Just before daybreak I was awoken by a hyena's multi-decibel laugh about 100mm from my head.

That was it. Break camp and let's get out of here.

About 200m further on there was a loud, eerie noise from above as a big fish eagle took off from the tree we were walking under.

We made it to the road, where we were picked up and returned to camp. But next morning my entire crew quit.

I can't imagine why.

The rest of my life ranged from office equipment mechanic and chemical company rep to traffic police officer, car sales, stints as a journalist for The Star, SABC, United Press International, the Rand Daily Mail, The Sunday Express, The Citizen, then into public relations before moving to Australia in 1982.

Where it started all over again, but somewhat less frantic.

It all becomes an unholy mess of journalism, PR, and various entrepreneurial activities to cobble into anything less than confusing.

I had scoops with South Africa's biggest family murder, the Six Day War, a bus-train crash that wiped out a town's young generation, Tom Pryce's death at Kyalami, and many more.

I was the PR chap for Saudi-Leyland's Alan Jones and Carlos Reutemann for the South Africa Grand Prix. And so on.

I've been shot at, survived two vehicle rolls down ravines, been attacked by a rhino, almost trampled by an elephant, bitten by a puff adder, and sundry other happenings - broken jaw, broken back, broken neck, and a delightful

aircraft mishap when a chunk of port prop sheared off mid-flight between Swaziland and Johannesburg and cut through the Navajo's nosecone.

It makes me know there certainly is a higher being looking after my hide.

Apart from that, I'm 5cm shorter than I once was, but I'm just fine and dandy.

