

Lions have right of way

In the 1960's my first wife and I and our young daughter Heather spent a few years in Africa. I was an Assistant District Engineer employed by the East African Railways & Harbours and we lived in Mombasa on the Indian Ocean coast of Kenya. After a spell looking after the Port of Mombasa, I was given responsibility for maintenance of 210 miles of the main railway line between Mombasa and Nairobi. The main line was single track with passing sidings at wayside stations every 10 to 15 miles apart. It was a very heavily used line, mainly for freight trains, and was the lifeline for both Kenya and Uganda.



For most of its length my section of line either formed the boundary of the Tsavo Game Park, which is the largest game park in Africa, or ran through it. Not surprisingly we had many encounters with big game and one evening I had an experience which thankfully turned out to be a near miss, which is why I am still here to tell the tale.

Once a month I went on safari to check the permanent way and as many of the bridges, station buildings, loco sheds, water supplies and staff houses etc. as was possible. We had a motorised rail mounted inspection vehicle and as we had to fit our travel in between all the train traffic on the single line, it was never easy. A staff car tracked us on the road which ran parallel to the rail track, but which could at times be a mile or two away. This allowed me some flexibility to move on if we were stuck in busy rail traffic.

One of my favourite places to stay overnight was about 150 miles up the line from the coast called Mtito Andei. It was in the middle of the game park with Tsavo West on one side and Tsavo East on the other. There was just one hotel and our wayside station was only half a mile away down a track. It was very convenient, I stayed at the hotel and my trusty staff car driver stayed in accommodation at the station.

After a long hot and humid day, it was good to get clean, have a cold beer, a good dinner and have an early night. On the evening in question I was just heading off to bed when a phone call came in from Rail Control in Mombasa (this was usually bad news). There had been a derailment and the main line was blocked at a place called Mariakani, about 20 miles downline from Mtito Andei. As I was the nearest Engineer to the scene of the accident the District Engineer had instructed me to attend, take charge and get the rail service back to normal asap.

As it was so near, I decided to walk down the short track to the station and get my driver and car organised for our journey to the scene of the accident. I put a few things in a bag and set off down the track but quickly realised that I had left my torch behind. So, I turned around and went back to the hotel. To save time I then decided to phone my driver at the station and ask him to collect me at the hotel. It took quite a bit longer than normal for him to reach the hotel and I asked him what had caused the delay. He told me that halfway from the station the track was completely blocked by several lions and he had to wait for them to move away before he could continue.



If I had not turned back and had continued a few hundred yards further, I would have walked straight into the group of lions and it is doubtful that I would be here to tell the tale.

To conclude the story, I was able to assemble a great African team at the accident site and after a busy night we reopened the main line at 6.30 am in the morning. After that we travelled back home to Mombasa and I spent the afternoon at the office compiling my report. That was the way it was.

Near Tragedy at the Beach

Living in Mombasa we had access to some beautiful beaches, and it was our usual practice to spend Sunday mornings at one of our local beaches. Our most convenient beach was called Nyali and we had been there many times without any problem and regarded it as being safe. However, on one occasion we had a near tragedy which shook us up and made us respect the power of the Indian Ocean more than we had done previously.



Heather was only about one year old, and she loved playing on the beach and in the shallow crystal-clear green water. On this occasion my wife and I held Heather's hands and walked with her between us into the sea until the water was up to our knees and to Heather's chest. We had done this many times before, but on this occasion to our horror we suddenly saw a huge wave forming and the undertow prevented us from turning and getting back onto the beach only yards away.

The wave swept completely over us. I had managed to lift Heather up to my chest, but we were bundled over and over, and she was swept from my arms. When the wave started to recede, our heads cleared the water and my wife was horrified to see that Heather was no longer in my arms. The usually crystal-clear water was now opaque because of all the sand the wave had churned up and it was impossible to see anything below the surface.

The undertow was once again racing back to sea from the shore and suddenly I spotted a little pair of hands just above the water and racing back towards me. I grabbed Heather as she was passing by and we had to fight our way out against the undertow although the water level was once again below knee level. Heather was wearing a big sombrero hat when we went into the sea and we never saw the hat again, but that did not bother us, we had saved what was most precious.