

THORNTON AND RUMSEY OF MBESUMA RANCH

By CAPT. R. W. M. LANGHAM, M.C.

THE death of Mr. F. S. R. Rumsey, D.C.M., of Mbesuma, in Kasama Hospital on 27th May, 1960, severed the last link with those pioneer farmers who took up land in the Northern Province prior to the First World War; the Smith brothers, the Blythe brothers, Barnshaw and Lobb. These men took up land in the fertile Saisi Valley south-east of Abercorn.

Goddard ran his cattle on Chunga Ranch near Isoka, Richard Thornton had Lua-Lua Farm near Kasama, and Yule, "Scotsdale" near Chinsali. All these men combined ranching with elephant hunting and at least two of them—Yule and the eldest Goddard were there in the halycon days before the introduction of the Game Laws: both bought their farms with the proceeds of the sale of ivory and both were killed by cow elephant; Yule in the Luangwa Valley and Goddard in the Mporokoso District.

Lieut.-Colonel Sir Stewart Gore-Browne, D.S.O. did not purchase the Shiwa N'gandu Estate until just after the 1914-18 war.

I should think everyone who had been stationed in the Northern Province north of the Chambeshi during the last forty years had met the genial Rumsey and stayed for tea, a meal or to spend the night. He was an excellent mechanic and people were rather apt to take advantage of this fact by getting him to tinker with their car—adjusting timing or brakes or putting in a new spare part: I know I did myself—and so did our worthy Editor!

As Mbesuma Ranch was situated on the main road from Kasama to both Chinsali and Isoka, he received plenty of visitors. Incidentally, this road was made by Thornton and Rumsey at their own expense; it linked up the old Chinsali-Isoka road with Croad's old Chinsali-Kasama road near Malole Mission and traversed the Chambeshi Flats.

Rumsey was born in Hampshire about eighty years ago: his father had a bicycle shop in—I think—Portsmouth. With the advent of motor cycles and the early motor cars, these were also dealt in, so that Rumsey practically grew up with the internal combustion engine—hence his expert knowledge.

When recruiting started for volunteers to serve in the Boer War, Rumsey joined the South African Constabulary, a mounted unit better known as "Baden Powell's Police". They sailed for South Africa, landing at Durban where both he and Thornton told me that as the harbour was then too small to take large ships, their horses had to be slung into lighters and so taken ashore.

When the Boer War was over, Rumsey took his discharge and joined another man running a small mineral water factory. As that was not much of a success he joined the Durban Fire Brigade which by that time had been motorised.

While there he saw an advertisement for a qualified man to take charge of and run the railway launches taking tourists staying at the Victoria Falls Hotel on pleasure trips up the Zambezi River. He applied for and got the job.

He was still there when the 1914-18 war started. Like the majority of able-bodied men he joined up (Rhodesia had a bigger percentage of men in the field than any other British Colony.)

A Rhodesian Motor Transport Corps was formed to carry stores to our troops operating on and north of the Rhodesia-German East Africa (now Tanganyika) border. When the Luapula River, Lake Bangweulu, Chambeshi River route came into operation, a depot for the goods brought up by canoe was formed at Chiwutawuta on the Chambeshi Ferry-Kasama Road with Mr. Gordon Lobb in charge. Rumsey was in charge of the fleet of "T" model Fords with box bodies which lifted the stores from there and took them to Abercorn via Kasama. He was given the rank of Sergeant-Major.

At the time General von Lettow Vorbeck made his final effort and broke back from Portuguese East Africa via Perimiho and Old Fife into Northern Rhodesia in October 1918, it was thought that his intention was to attack Abercorn, and Rumsey received orders to evacuate all European women and children from Abercorn to Kasama, and all spare arms and ammunition were rushed from Kasama to Abercorn.

When it was found that the Germans had by-passed Abercorn and were making for Kasama, evacuation commenced over again, this time to the south of the Chambeshi Ferry together with any stores which might be of use to the enemy: what couldn't be moved was burnt.

Frank Rumsey at Mbesuma
about 1938

[Photo: W. V. Bretford]



When the news of the Armistice finally came through, Rumsey was instructed by Mr. Croad (the magistrate) to take the news to von Lettow Vorbeck: rather an unpleasant job, as although his car bore a white flag on its bonnet, this meant nothing to the German askari, each picquet making a point of firing a few shots as he passed. The story of how he got in touch with von Spangenberg, von Lettow's adjutant, is well known, as are the subsequent proceedings prior to the German surrender.

For this exploit he was awarded the D.C.M.

Whilst stationed at Kasama, Rumsey came in contact with Richard Thornton who then owned Lua-Lua, a farm just outside Kasama Boma.

Thornton told him that when Frank Goddard had been forced to take his cattle south at the beginning of the 1914-18 war owing to the constant raiding across the border by the German forces near Old Fife, he had gone—with his herds—to a place on the Chambeshi River near the Mbesuma Stream.

This stream, Goddard said, rose in the Chikufi range and was never known to have dried up. In addition, the district was free from fly and as the Chambeshi Flats were under water for six months of the year there was new grass on them just when feeding in other parts was drying up. It was therefore an ideal spot for cattle breeding. Thornton said he intended selling Lua-Lua Farm and taking up land at Mbesuma: he invited Rumsey to join him in starting a cattle ranch. Rumsey agreed to do so when he had settled his affairs.

Thornton bought land from the Government in 1921 at Mbesuma. Rumsey joined him a year later. Thornton came from a family which had been farming for generations in Norfolk. Of his three brothers one joined the Army (R.A.M.C.), one the Navy and one the Indian Civil Service. The one that joined the R.A.M.C. was posted to the Indian Army. In India he had considerable experience in the treatment of cholera or bubonic plague, so that when an epidemic broke out in Natal among the indentured Indians, Dr. Thornton was seconded to the Natal Government. For his services there he was knighted: he remained with the South African Government and in the Second World War Brigadier-General Sir Edward Thornton was in command of the South African Medical Corps.

When it was time for Richard Thornton to leave school he had to go into a bank. This did not suit him at all and when the Boer War broke out he joined the Norfolk Yeomanry and served with them in South Africa.

When the war was over he took his discharge out here and made his way north to Northern Rhodesia, where he took up land on the Lua-Lua Stream near Kasama.

At that time the only market for the sale of cattle was at Broken Hill—several hundred miles to the south. As it was impossible to trek cattle south without passing through several tsetse fly belts, the animals were bound to be "fly struck"; it was, therefore, necessary to make a contract for the sale of the cattle before setting out, as they had to be slaughtered within six months of their arrival at Broken Hill.

The time chosen for the yearly trek was after the first rains; to ensure there should be grazing for the cattle en route. Information as regards this was obtained from the District Commissioners at Mpika, Serenje and Mkushi. The actual trekking was done

where possible at night, firstly because it was cooler and secondly because the tsetse fly is quiescent at night and unless one actually knocks against the bush under whose leaves it is sleeping—it does not bite.

On one of these treks with cattle Thornton underwent an experience which, had they survived it, would have cured most men of any desire to remain in the country.

He had passed through Mpika and Serenje Districts and arrived in Mkushi District. As he had done the night's trek and the cattle appeared to have settled down he took up his quarters in a deserted hut without a door: he had a camp bed, blankets and the usual ulendo kit with him in the hut.

After being asleep for some time, he was awakened by an excruciating pain in his one hand which was lying outside his bedclothes: by the faint light coming through the doorway he could see that some large animal was standing by his bed and had his hand in its mouth. He was naturally confused at being so rudely awakened and he told me that he had a vague idea that his only hope was to catch hold of its tongue as one does when "drenching" a horse. (NOTE.—When drenching a horse or cow, a nose-twitch is put on and the head raised to the required angle: the hand is then inserted in the animal's mouth, the tongue firmly grasped and pulled out and up into the corner of the mouth. By this means the bottle containing the medicine (or drench) can be inserted in the throat without fear of its being broken by the animal biting it.)

This, as I have said, was the idea at the back of Thornton's mind—but it didn't work—it simply resulted in his other hand being crushed as the first had been. All this time of course he had been shouting for his boy, who arrived with a bunch of blazing grass. It must have been a tight fit in a small eight or ten feet diameter native hut—the lion, Thornton, campbed, ulendo kit and boy.

Thornton told the boy to take his shotgun which was leaning—loaded—against the wall of the hut near the head of his bed. The gun was an old-fashioned "hammer" gun and it was customary to leave these guns at "half-cock", thus rendering them perfectly safe. This half-cock business was quite beyond the boy's understanding and he simply fumbled with the gun. Apparently during this time the lion was an interested spectator.

Then Thornton told the boy to hand him the gun, which he did: in spite of his badly mangled hands, Thornton managed to cock the gun, and shot the lion.

After Thornton's death, Christmas 1934, Rumsey asked me to go through Thornton's papers: I found a letter from the District Commissioner Mkushi informing Thornton that the native who came to his rescue had just died and returning the balance of cash he (the District Commissioner) had in hand. Apparently, after the adventure with the lion, Thornton had paid the native 10s. per month in recognition of his bravery—not much nowadays, but quite good pay for a native then, when carriers were only paid 5s. or less a month.

The day after the encounter with the lion, Thornton had to continue his trek with the cattle, although he must have been suffering considerable pain with his hands, which had been roughly bandaged by his natives. Fortunately, shortly afterwards he met Dr. Breeks—brother of Admiral Breeks. Dr. Breeks, who was a Government Medical Officer, fixed up his hands as well as he could and accompanied him to railhead; finally,



Mbesuma Ranch House

[Photo: John Pickmere]

large was that experience had taught the partners that when a lion entered a kraal in which cattle were tightly packed, it went on killing for the sake of killing: if, however, the cattle were able to stampede after one of their number had been killed, the lion did not trouble to follow them but remained with his kill.

Rumsey had a narrow escape one day when visiting an outside herd accompanied by his dog, a mongrel bull-terrier. The latter was seized by a leopard; Rumsey jumped off his bicycle, grabbed his rifle and fired, only wounding the leopard. As always, the wounded leopard charged. Rumsey, who was left-handed, managed to get a cartridge jammed in the magazine and, as a leopard moves like lightning, he had no time to rectify it. Rumsey although a short man had very powerful arms and shoulders, so he rammed the muzzle of the rifle into the open mouth of the leopard and down its throat, his idea being that by working the muzzle backwards and forwards, the foresight of the rifle would so lacerate the animal's throat that blood would choke it. However, the shaking of the rifle during the leopard's struggles caused the jammed cartridge to drop out of the magazine; Rumsey worked his bolt, pushing another cartridge into the chamber and that was the end of the leopard.

[In telling me the story Rumsey said that as the leopard charged he swung the jammed rifle round and knocked the leopard down with a blow of the stock on the side of the animal's head. The rifle broke at the pistol grip and it was thus only the barrel that Rumsey was holding down the leopard's throat.—Editor.]

That is the only case I have heard of in which the person attacked at close quarters by a wounded leopard escaped without a scratch. I saw the rifle afterwards with the marks of the leopard's claws on the fore-end.

One of the first things that Rumsey had to do after joining Thornton was to bring up two pure bred Shorthorn bulls which they had imported from South Africa, as their intention was to raise a herd from native cows sired by pure bred bulls.

As numerous "fly belts" had to be traversed between the railway line and Chinsali, each animal had to be provided with a stout canvas suit which completely covered all parts of the body except the hoofs: holes were left for the eyes.

It must have been a very uncomfortable method of travelling for the animals, but the Smith brothers, Barnshaw, Blythe and Lobb took horses right up to Abercorn by this method and even had a race-course of sorts there.

Rumsey brought up one more pair of bulls by this method—a Shorthorn and a South Devon—and then bought a 1½-ton lorry as being a much quicker and safer method of transport.

Bad luck seemed to dog the heels of the partners during the remaining years of Thornton's life. Firstly, a cattle buyer came up north with a letter of introduction from the Northern Rhodesia Government Veterinary Department. They sold him over £1,000 worth of cattle and considered they were extremely lucky to be able to sell right on the ranch: cattle to be paid for after the buyer had disposed of them. Smith brothers and, I think Barnshaw, also sold lesser herds.

As soon as the cattle buyer arrived at the railway—his creditors stepped in and seized the lot! So the ranchers in the Northern Province got nothing. This was a big setback when it is remembered that the purchasing power of the pound was four times what it is to-day.

What kept them going was the fact that labour recruiting for the Union Miniere mines had started in the Province. Sir Robert Williams had the recruiting contract, his local agent in the Northern Province being the late R. W. Yule. Thornton and Rumsey were the sub-agents for the Chinsali District.

The next trouble they had was follicular mange broke out in the herds. This made a lot of extra work picking out infected animals and segregating them.

After that had been cleared up, Thornton, was on his way south in charge of a herd—headed for Broken Hill. While passing through Mpika he received a message from the District Commissioner saying that four eland had been found dead under a tree and that the Veterinary Department had forbidden movement of all cattle south as Rinderpest was suspected. The only thing to do was to return to the ranch and as it was inevitable that some of the herd had been bitten by fly they had to be segregated. A number of them died. When a post mortem was held on the four eland, it was found they had been struck by lightning, but the fear of rinderpest has hovered over Northern Rhodesia since the great epidemic of 1896 which swept through the country from Tanganyika to Cape Colony, killing cattle, buffalo, eland and kudu.

In 1930 the two partners sent a cheque to South Africa for the purchase of four young Shorthorn pedigree bulls. Shortly after its despatch, an embargo was put on the importation of cattle from South Africa owing to an outbreak of East Coast fever. As the man to whom the cheque was sent was a well-known member of the Shorthorn Breeders Association, Thornton told him to retain the cheque until such time as the ban should be lifted. The next they heard was that the man had gone bankrupt and that their £200 was engulfed in the ruins of his estate.

However, what I think really broke poor Thornton's heart was what proved to be the last trip he took with cattle to the railway line,

Before leaving Mbesuma he had made a contract with "Wingey" Werner, a cattle buyer, for the purchase of the whole herd on its arrival at Kapiri Mposhi. When Thornton arrived at Mpika he received a wire saying that Werner had died suddenly. Of course death cancels all contracts entered into by the deceased, but Thornton pushed on hoping that the executors of Werner's estate would uphold the contract.

When he arrived at Kapiri Mposhi he found that Werner's executors refused to renew the contract. He was therefore left with a herd of cattle on his hands: cattle which the buyers knew he *had* to dispose of quickly as having passed through numerous "fly" belts they must have been bitten and would have to be slaughtered within six months.

Although the District Commissioner Broken Hill came out and tried to influence the buyers to give him a decent price Thornton after a fortnight was forced to accept their offer of £4 per head—beautiful grade beasts.

On his return to Mbesuma he took up his usual wet season quarters in a cottage they had on the Chambeshi River. Here he was taken ill and was eventually driven into Kasama by Rumsey. Richard Thornton died in Kasama Hospital at Christmas, 1934 of "Sprue", a West Indian disease which the late Dr. Alexander Scott told me he had never before seen in this country.

Thornton was one of the nicest and kindest men I have ever met. He was rather quiet and reserved with strangers, as he was rather self-conscious regarding the injuries to his hands and his eye. It was a great pity that he could not have lived to see the ranch affairs in a more prosperous condition.

After Thornton's death, Rumsey was left with the burden of paying Thornton's share of the cattle and estate to the latter's executors. However, when the partnership was first entered into, each made a will to the effect that the survivor should be allowed ten years in which to find the money.

Owing to the growth of Kasama with its need of fresh meat, and the establishment of a Polish Refugee Camp in Abercorn during the Second World War, Rumsey was enabled to pay off the amount due to Thornton's executors in six or seven years.

In 1950 he found he was being systematically robbed of cattle by his head captao acting in collusion with half a dozen of his herdsmen. After these men had been duly punished, Rumsey came to the conclusion that he was getting too old to properly patrol the various scattered herds and run the ranch as it should be run: he therefore advertised the ranch and cattle for sale as a going concern.

It was bought by the Northern Rhodesia Government, Rumsey retaining the ranch house and one hundred acres of land surrounding it, the proviso being that, at his death, the Government should have the first offer to purchase the plot.

As I said in the beginning, he will be very much missed in the district, as there was always a cheerful welcome for anyone calling there.

Unfortunately he suffered a great deal from muscular rheumatism during the last three or four years of his life. He died in Kasama Hospital, and is buried at Mbesuma Ranch opposite his old house.

[*Mr. Derek Goodfellow of the Development Commissioner's office in Kasama tells me that friends of Rumsey and Thornton would like to erect a memorial of some kind, possibly at the pontoon crossing at Mbesuma. They would be grateful for ideas.—Editor.*]

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