

FRED BALESTRA

By Christopher Bean

(Note: Reproduced here from Volume 2 of 'Expatriate Experience of Life and work in Nyasaland' by Colin Baker, with the kind permission of Mpemba Books, owners of the copyright.)

I first met Fred Balestra shortly after my arrival in Mlanje as a Police Officer in 1958. I had been told about this almost legendary chap who lived round the corner of the mountain at a place called the Fort Lister Gap.

In due course, either as a result of some complaint from him, or on a routine police patrol, I visited him at his estate. It probably had a name but I don't remember it. His house was a typical planter's house, big and sprawling and set on the slope of the mountain looking out to the west over the Phalombe Plain and to the east, over Portuguese East Africa. The views were magnificent.

Fred was a very short, lean, grey haired, Yorkshireman, so of course we hit it off at once. Like most people there he always wore khaki shorts and shirts and suede veldschoon, or bush boots as they were more commonly called there. He spoke absolutely fluent Chinyanja and also Chilomwe which most of the local tribesmen spoke, being of the Alomwe tribe. They were an offshoot of the Shangaan tribe in Portuguese East Africa. (P.E.A).

Fred farmed tobacco and sheep and had the usual estate owner's problems, being the weather, baboons, theft by the locals, and a problem not very common among other estate owners, he was plagued by leopards. At the time I met him he had shot over one hundred



and forty leopard on his estate, a number of them from his bed in his bedroom. On one occasion he called me out to see that a leopard and climbed into one of his tobacco barns in which he was keeping sheep overnight and killed more than forty sheep. Fred told me that the leopard was the only cat which went into a blood lust and once it started killing, just went on until there was nothing left to kill. It might have killed the first sheep to eat, but not the rest. Fred had heard the commotion from his bed and went down to his barn and killed the leopard in the act. It was still there being skinned by labourers when I got there.

For his own purposes Fred had kept written records of every leopard he had shot noting its size, weight, sex, how it was killed and why it was killed together with of course the date and time. He was probably the most knowledgeable person I've ever met with regard to

leopard. He also loved hunting and by his own admission liked nothing better than to cross the nearby Portuguese border, on foot, and hunt illegally there. Of course, in Nyasaland, we weren't bothered about what he did in P.E.A. In addition, however, he most liked to do this with a light at night. Very very illegal and unsporting.

At that stage I had never hunted anything so I begged him to take me with him on one of these night excursions. He finally agreed and with great excitement I drove out to his place in the late afternoon one day and when it got dark, we drove a short distance, left his vehicle in Nyasaland and walked over the border. We had four or five hunting boys with us and we walked and walked and walked and saw nothing. The boys were getting hungry and complaining so the next pair of eyes Fred saw in his light, he shot and found it was a civet cat. Nothing fazed, the boys, without even skinning or gutting the cat, made a fire and singed off the fur, scraped it off, half burned the carcass and then ate it! It was said that the Alomwe would eat anything. Shortly after this, we gave up and returned home. I arrived back in



Mlanje just in time to shave and get dressed in uniform and go to work, without a word to anybody as to where I had been overnight. This was my first taste of hunting in Africa, and not a very edifying start I must say.

I left Mlanje some twenty months later and to my pleasure bumped into Fred again when I visited the Sinamatela Camp in Wankie Game Reserve in 1968. I was amazed to find that Fred was in charge of the camp, not as a ranger though, and his wife was in charge of catering there. I never heard of or saw a wife whilst in Mlanje so where he collected her I could not say. He told me that he was allowed to do a limited amount of hunting in the form of



culling or for the pot and I dare say that in Wankie he was rather more successful than he had been in P.E.A. It was indeed a pleasure to see him, and I can even hear his voice so clearly now. I left him there and never heard of him thereafter.