

Black Rhino Relocation at Lapalala

A furrow bored itself along the hillside, hissing through the long grass like a rip through fabric. A family of warthogs blurred away - a white and black martial eagle came into sight above them and then wheeled slowly, gaining height into the distance. Then on all sides every living creature that became aware of the presence of man took to flight. The panic gradually extended, emptying a whole corner of Africa.

Anton and I turned to our left, looking into the sky about two kilometers away, the massive hulk of the Mi8-MTV helicopter slapped it's way loudly towards us at 120 knots.

It was no wonder all the wildlife was scattering!

With a main rotor diameter of 192 feet, capable of displacing 13 tonnes of air and powered by 4450 horsepower, the Mi8-MTV is an impressive aircraft.

Although the machine may first appear to be ungainly and almost 'ugly,' it is soon clear that it is in a class of its own when the machine lifts off to work.

My task was to find, dart and then get a ground crew into the thick bush to secure six black rhino from the remote and rugged mountains of Lapalala Wilderness Reserve in the Waterberg.

Each rhino would then be rolled onto and secured to a custom made stretcher, ready to be lifted out of the bush by the Mi8.

This was to be a challenge in every respect since the rhino by nature were extremely secretive and the terrain was as wild, rugged and remote as one could possibly find, with no access by road.

There were no margins for mistakes.

Even though it was mid winter, the bush was extremely thick and carpeted the hills, ravines and valleys with 100% cover. An engine out over any of the terrain surrounding us would result in a total loss of the aircraft. Bottoming out from an autorotation would have to be done in an extremely, nose high attitude, sliding the tail in first to prevent the helicopter from tucking, nosing in and rolling over. The only chance of surviving a forced landing in such thick bush would be to ensure that the tail and skids took the impact and to do everything possible to prevent the hull from rolling onto its roof.

Finding the elusive rhino would be one thing, finding any form of an LZ in order to get access to the darted rhino would be another.

The reserve, covering an area of 45 000 hectares was not small, making our search for the animals something like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Early that morning I had approached Lapalala on a long final to the GPS reference I had been given by Anton. It was not difficult to find our LZ, it was the only clearing in the bush, large enough for 20 small helicopters, or one Mi8. Stashed in the far west corner, 30 or so drums of Jet A1 lay in neat rows. I smiled at this, calculating that at the very most, I would only need around four drums tops. That left the remaining 6000 liters for the Mi8.

Also on the edge of the field were a gathering of 10 assorted bakkies with all their occupants, seated and waiting for the action, relaxing for now in the shade. I was happy to see that they were all safely out of the way from our approach path and rotor downwash.

After shutting down the JetRanger I strolled over to Anton, completed all the introductions and then settled down with mugs of tea to discuss the operation. It would be a good thing to get all the fine details out the way while awaiting the arrival of the Mi8, care of Titan helicopters.

'Ant, the biggest problem that I foresee on my side will be finding any sort of landing site, close to the rhino. I'm going to have to ferry in at least two to three loads of crew and equipment at each animal and there's going to be no control in the bush to keep things safe. We can hardly do a dry run with your guys beforehand because the terrain we go into is going to be different at each rhino. I'm going to have to adapt my de-busing as I go along and I know for sure that the first crew in will have to jump. Then how do we get the chain saws and ropes out?'

then I remembered the obvious. 'Of course, you and the vet are going to be inside the helicopter when we dart the rhino, you have to carry a chainsaw to free the rhino if it's tangled up, then you can already start to clear an LZ.'

'Yep, I will, and then on your first run in with the scouts, take Petrus. If he sits behind you, he can talk you

down watching your tail rotor. Let the first two out, even if they need to jump, then Petrus can lower the equipment to them. You come back to pick up the second load and by the time you return the guys will have cleared you an LZ.'

'Good plan Ant. It's going to be the same crew that we drop at each site, so one good briefing and one real live run should do it. Lets get the guys around the helicopter now and run through all scenarios.'

The sound of the Mi8 coming in from Nelspruit left no doubt that this was a large machine; the mini tornado that followed in its wake as it came into the hover above the clearing left me stressing that maybe I should have checked what the insurance said about my JetRanger getting blown away.

We started with a team briefing and soon got all the safety drills sorted out clearly. I would be exposed to maximum danger with the number of people climbing in and out of helicopter, into seriously confined areas that would not always be on level ground, and all the crew were carrying various loose items.

The ground teams were split into groups with a safety officer to control bussing and de-bussing.

Teams of two trackers had been deployed in different parts of the reserve and each group of trackers was concentrating on locating spoor of black rhino in their own area.

When they found tracks, no easy task considering the terrain, (mountains with solid rock and wall-to-wall bush), they would follow the tracks diligently, keeping unnoticed, acquiring and keeping a visual on the rhino.

I must mention here that black rhino are about as friendly as a whole nest of angry scorpions, black mambas, mother-in-law's and wounded buffalo, all with a bad attitude.

As soon as the trackers had a confirmed visual of a target rhino, or in some cases, warm dung, the trackers would radio through the message.

The Bell 206 was fuelled for two hours, all doors were removed to ensure safer operations, a monkey harness was fitted for the vet and the leather seats had been removed in order provide space for the assortment of bush clearing tools.

The Mi8 crew had the weighted pallet in position and were standing by for their call to start.

Initially, when the trackers had located a rhino, Pier, the vet, Anton and I would rush to the helicopter, armed with a dart gun and a chain saw.

The procedure was simple. We would head out to find the trackers who would talk us onto the rhino. Once the animal was darted I would then call the Mi8 pilot to warn him to prepare for a start up.

Fortunately our base landing zone was nicely hosed down with water to reduce dust; very necessary to prevent a 'red out' when the Mi8 lifted.

The lazy silence was finally broken by the radio. "lapalala 4 lapalala 2, we have one bull very close, over."

We run to the helicopter and I do a final walk around to check hatches and tie downs.

Pier follows, climbing in behind me and Anton sits front left. I crank the starter up to 15%, cracking the throttle and after a couple of minutes we are ready and lifting away towards the ravines in the west.

Arriving in the vicinity of the trackers, I set up a grid system and we search for the people, obscured in the dense bush below. Suddenly I notice their red flag attached to a stick, waving frantically and pointing in the general direction of the rhino. The bush is really thick and we are all straining our eyes for movement, then as I bank to the left I notice the gray dome shape of a black rhino bull standing still under a tree.

"I have him visual." I call out excitedly.

Not daring to take my eye from him for a second, I bank sharp to position the helicopter, descending down to the rhino.

Pointing the animal out to Pier and warning him to get ready, I bring the machine down to just above the trees. Our downwash blows up dust and leaves, provoking the rhino who is now performing a little dance and hopping on it's hind legs, head and horn held high, beady eyes fixed on us and trying to hook us out of the sky.

He breaks away and I follow crab like, waiting for a chance to get into the trees to ensure a good dart.

Small twigs are enough to ricochet the R1500.00 dart and with the density of the vegetation one must be

ready for the only gap that comes.

I warn Pier of an opening ahead; he fires the dart; we both check that the plunger is down fully, indicating that the rhino has received a full dose of Eterophine. Satisfied, I pull up to orientate myself and gain sufficient height to establish communication with Mark, the captain of the Mi8, to be standby start.

If all goes well we will have six minutes to manoeuvre the rhino to a more open area where I will at least be able to get down into ground effect or even on to the ground with one skid firm, allowing my crew to exit. Back at the base LZ, Mark is doing a final walk around with the engineer. They have 2,000 litres of fuel on board for the sortie, which will give them around two hours endurance.

The rhino is well affected by the drug and finally gets caught up in a dense thicket on the side of a wooded hill. The LZ that I select in order to get Pier and Anton out is covered in large rocks and surrounded by monster trees, I gently hold the machine under full power, balancing the front of the skids on some firm ground and keep everything rock steady. Only the front section of the skids are in contact with rock, the rear of the helicopter is suspended over an abyss, Pier has to crawl carefully along the skid to reach terra firma but this is our only option.

They climb out gently, leaving me to fly back to the base where I pick up Petrus and three scouts, ferrying them back to the rhino.

In the mean while Anton has cleared me a safer LZ with the chainsaw while Pier is monitoring the respiration of the rhino.

Mark at the Mi8 has now started the 80 horsepower, fixed shaft centrifugal compressor APU which supplies the compressed air to start each main engine.

I am flying like crazy back and forth, ferrying in water, equipment and the ground crew who must clear the area for the arrival of the palate.

They must then man lift the 900 kilogram rhino into position and strap him down for his flight out of the bush to the recovery vehicle.

Mark is completing the five minute start up by starting the down wind engine first to prevent the hot exhaust gasses from being ingested into the second engine during its light up, preventing a hot start.

The rhino is now ready to receive the palate and I hover a short distance away from the Mi8 at the base LZ, ready to escort him to the pick up.

They fly at around 60kph with the palate to prevent it from flying up into the blades, and to stabilize the craft further, it is flown with the two axis auto pilot engaged. The machine has two hydraulic systems to counter the 1 800kg stick forces imposed by the monster blades turning at 192rpm. Quite a sight from my tiny jetranger.

Hovering above the rhino I give the Mi8 a fix and then clear out.

They come in on a long steady final for the pick up with JP, the tech, hanging out the door and pattering the pilots into final position. Initially, they place the palate away from people onto the ground to earth the line from static, then hover taxi the palate into position.

Their rotor down wash is very impressive; the rhino has his ears sealed and taped and his eyes well protected against the dust, wind and noise.

The palate is dropped off and the Mi8 moves away to wait for the ground crew to get the rhino onto the palate and secure. The final webbing straps are fastened and I get the thumbs up to call back the Mi8 that is standing by on the ground at flight idle two kilometers away.

He returns to carefully lift the precious cargo for a flight to the recovery crate back at the base where Richard, another vet is waiting. He will monitor the offloading and administer the antidote, do the micro chipping, blood samples, measuring and finally loading the rhino into the crate.

I spend the next twenty minutes flying back and forth bringing all the crew and equipment back to the main LZ

The Mi8 returns to her position at the base LZ, shuts down and the crew start topping up with fuel and opening engine cowlings to conduct the after flight inspection, ensuring that they are good to go for the next call out.

I am almost done with all the ferrying and am on the way back with my last load.

The entire operation was exceptionally efficient. The rhino was only down for 45 minutes, 1.4 hours flying

for me to recover and ferry all the crew back and forth and 0.4 hours for the Mi8 to lift and move the rhino.

Within two ours we are all together again back on the ground, the Mi8 has been refuelled and the craft is ready for the next flight.

It's back to the shade for more tea, some relaxation while waiting for the next radio call.