

Into the Jaws of death – from a conversation Paul had with Zoe Brennan

Ahead of us, I could see the mist rising above Victoria Falls. Dusk was closing in on the river, the red sky illuminating the jungle on either side, and it was glorious. I was leading a canoe safari in Zimbabwe, down the mighty Zambezi - Africa's fourth largest river. Having worked as a guide for many years and founded my own safari company, I knew that stretch of the river as well as anybody. But that day was to change my life forever. Little did I know that I was about to be savaged by a hippo and come horribly close to death.

We got on to the river at around 3pm, taking three French and German couples in separate canoes, paddled by myself and my guides, Ben and Evans. Another guide, Mike, followed in a little red Kayak.

Everything was going well. We'd seen elephants, some spectacular crocodile action and a few hippos. The tourists had just opened the coolbox and were mixing gin and tonics as we drifted lazily towards the Falls, admiring the sunset.

Coming from a fifth generation white African family with a long history in the British military and ancestors including Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer - the "Tiger of Malaya" who defeated the Malaya Emergency guerilla rebels in 1954, famously declaring "the jungle had been neutralized" - I felt confident that I could handle anything the continent could throw at me. Little did I suspect the full horror of what was shortly to transpire (which has been recreated for a TV programme *Darkside of Hippos on the National Geographic Channel*).

Spotting a family of hippos, with females and calves, we made a detour to avoid them. Their heads were barely visible above the surface, but I knew these three-ton animals can be aggressive and should be given a wide berth. With ivory teeth tougher than those of elephants, said to be able to deflect bullets, hippos kill more people than any other big game animal. Suddenly, Evans's boat was hit by a bull hippo we hadn't seen and he was in the water. I made towards him, desperate to get him out before he washed into the mother and calf - she would certainly kill to protect her young.

When boats are torpedoed in films, you see the mass of water powering towards the vessel. That was what it was like when the bull hippo charged my canoe. I had been taught an African trick for this very situation: you slap the water with your paddle - and sure enough the hippo turned away.

I was now beside Evans. His arm reached out, I leant over to grab his hand and our fingers almost touched. There was just time to get the heck out of there, when the water between us erupted. The next thing I knew I was in the river.

It took me a while to comprehend what had happened - if you've ever been in a car crash or slid across ice, you know the feeling that the world has gone into slow motion. I later learnt that that was the adrenalin hitting me, and my body going into survival mode.

Everything seemed strangely silent and still. A few very long seconds ticked by as I tried to figure out what was going on. From my waist up, I was not dry, but I wasn't wet either. This incredible pressure was crushing my lower back. Slowly, I became aware that I was in the hippo's mouth. I was head first up to my waist down a hippo's throat. Managing to free one arm, I felt the coarse bristles on his snout, which answered my first question - I wasn't sure if I had been attacked by a crocodile or a hippo.

The great bull hippo went berserk, thrashing around with all the force of his huge bulk, before eventually spitting me out. As I swam away, I presumed Evans was swimming for his life, too.

Daily Mail

Instead he was paralyzed by terror and shock. I turned round to go back for him and was moving in for the classic lifesaver's hold, when wham, I was hit again - the hippo had come back for me.

I always carried a gun on these expeditions - my father went to Sandhurst and was a senior officer in Zimbabwean army, so by the age of six I was pretty skillful with an Uzi sub-machine gun. I reached for my .357 Magnum revolver - but too late. This time, the hippo got me in his jaw feet first.

Although it was terrifying, it must have looked almost farcical. Here was this person sticking out of a hippo's mouth, like in a cartoon. He was shaking me around, driving me underwater, before spitting me out again. I couldn't see Evans.

Next, I see the monster charging towards me for the third and worst attack. He got me crossways in his mouth, through the middle. Spearing my chest and stomach with his long tusks, he dashed me from side to side as I clung on to his tusks to stop my flesh tearing further. My legs dangled from one side of his jaw, my head protruded from the other.

One of the clients later said it was like watching a vicious dog tear apart a rag doll.

I have no idea how long it went for - an awful eternity. Then he stopped. Everything was deathly still. I was underwater, still in the hippo's mouth. It was the most surreal moment of my life. I could see the colors above me, these beautiful blues and greens with the sunlight streaming through the water, highlighting the bubbles. It was like sitting at the bottom of a wonderful swimming pool. I wondered who could hold their breath the longest - me or the hippo. Then I realized that my blood was mingling with the water, the blues and greens becoming contaminated with red. Nothing felt real - it was like being in an interactive film. At that point, the hippo spat me out and I made my escape.

There wasn't much of me left. In the most incredible display of bravery, Mike had paddled the kayak towards me and got me to the safety of the rocks. He's the only reason I'm still alive. I asked where Evans was and Mike replied: "He's gone mate, he's gone."

We were in a bad way, perched on a couple of rocks in the middle of the river - the gun, radio and first aid kit gone, and one guide lost. The hippo was some yards away, staring at us and occasionally chomping the water.

Then I made the mistake by looking at myself. My foot looked as if someone had taken a hammer to it, my arms were barely still attached, my left arm crushed to a pulp. Afterwards I've learnt that the medical term for what the hippo had done to my arm is 'degloved' - the flesh had been torn from the bone, from the elbow down. I asked Mike to bandage my arm up to hold it, but blood started coming from out of my mouth.

Mike rolled me over and said that he could see part of my lung protruding from one of the holes in my back. He used the clingfilm from one of our trays of snacks as a bandage. The doctors believed that saved my life, as it stopped my lung collapsing.

Even though I was in a pretty bad way, I knew that we had to find Evans. I told Mike to stay with the clients, and Ben and I went in one of the remaining canoes. We drifted past the hippo, still lurking by the rocks. I was terrified it would finish us off.

The body is an incredible thing. The pain stayed off while I needed it to and hit only when I got into the boat. It was the sort of pain where dying seemed a good option - it later transpired that I had 38 bite marks over my body: deep wounds across my face, the back of my head, neck, back

chest, stomach, both arms and my left leg and foot. Only my right leg had escaped the savaging.

At that point, I had a profound spiritual moment, where I realized I had a choice - do I stay or do I go? I can only describe it as the most profound sense of calm and relaxation; like nothing I'd ever felt before. The physical pain was gone and I felt this extraordinary peace. I had a sense of what I would be leaving if I chose to give in. I thought of my sister, who had just a baby daughter. I chose to cling to life and the pain came back.

We got to the shore, we didn't get attacked, but we didn't find Evans either. His body was found three days later. There wasn't a scratch on him - he had drowned.

Back at our Land Rover, we radioed for help. There we had an incredible stroke of luck - a medical air rescue team was practicing a few miles away. They got to me in under ten minutes. I was leaking like a sieve and wouldn't have lasted much longer.

Even more fortuitously, they had a doctor with them who was a shock and trauma specialist. It was nothing short of miraculous. Rescue teams set off to find the guys on the rocks.

That was where my luck ended, though - the doctor couldn't give me painkillers, because of my head, neck, and spine injuries. A flight wasn't an option, because of my lung injury. The only possibility was to make for Bulawayo, five hours' drive away.

I was wheeled into hospital at around midnight. They thought they were taking off both my arms and my leg. At this tiny Catholic hospital in the middle of Africa, I had my next stroke of luck, because I was treated by Dr. Ncube - an incredible man among men. He was the orthopedic surgeon who was going to work on me. I said: "Doctor, I know that you've got to do what you've got to do, but what do you say to taking the minimalist approach?" Those words had an incredible effect on my life. Dr. Ncube says that at that moment he thought "What the hell? Let's go adventurous on this."

The balance is to take off enough to prevent infection setting in, and it turned out Dr. Ncube had to go in and chop off more later and I did nearly die of gas gangrene. But I was still left with more than would otherwise have been the case.

Before the operation, a nurse said to me: "If you've got a God, you'd better call on him." A priest administered the last rights. That's a real confidence booster, I'll tell you.

Coming round from the operation, I tried to move my left fingers. I could definitely feel them moving, but there, where my elbow, my forearm, my hand and my moving fingers should have been, there was just an empty space. My left arm had been amputated above my elbow. I felt sick to my stomach, as it started to sink in - they'd chopped off my arm. In the space of just a few hours I'd gone from being an active outdoorsman to being a cripple.

All the doctors I've seen since have remarked on what an incredible job Dr. Ncube did. He rewired my foot, which was entirely crushed. He amputated my left arm above the elbow and below my shoulder - but had to remove all of it in the second operation. He managed to keep my right arm, for which I am eternally grateful, and sealed up my lung. I had holes in my head and torso. It must have been like putting a torn patchwork quilt back together.

A month to the day after I arrived, I left that hospital. No one had thought that I would leave it alive. Then became the hardest part of all: the long process of rehabilitation.

Although I grew up in Africa, I had served in the British Army for a while, as was tradition in my

Daily Mail

family. So after a few months of recuperating with my family in Zimbabwe, I came to England. At the Roehampton Hospital I was fitted with a new left arm. It cost me a fortune. I had expected a 'bionic' arm, but - disappointingly - what I gained was little more than a paperweight, hanging by my side without function like a deadweight.

I returned to Africa in January 1997 physically put back together - although missing a limb. Emotionally and mentally I was at rock bottom. I couldn't come to terms with being handicapped and often wondered why I'd bothered to fight so hard to live. What was I going to do with my life now? The attack had wiped me out financially, I'd lost my business, spent my savings on medical treatment and my career was over. I never saw my friends any more and had split from my girlfriend for many years - she was spectacularly supportive after the accident, but I was being an ass and just wasn't in a good place.

It was March of 1997. I was sipping tea on the veranda, feeling very low, when the words from Dr. Ncube came back to me. He had said: "Always remember this - you are the sum of your choices. You are exactly what and where you choose to be in life." At the time I wasn't very impressed; I had bits hanging off of me and was suffering appalling shock. But there on the veranda, nearly a year later I thought: "You know what, he's right."

The inklings of an idea stirred in me and I've kept those words close ever since. That idea was to travel the length of the Zambezi in a canoe with a friend, from its source to the sea. I had always dreamed of doing so. Why not do it now? The fact that I only had one arm made it more of a challenge - I wouldn't bother to wear my prosthetic arm for the trip.

I also wanted to raise money for amputees in Africa, who were not able to get prosthetic limbs. So many children lose a limb in Africa and I wanted to do something for them. I set up a charity Make-A-Difference and found an American prosthetic company to support us who made me a special paddle and a new arm.

It was about 1600 miles down the Zambezi - it took us three months in 1998. We completed the fullest descent of the river to date. It was hard - we laughed and cried. There was a stretch in Angola, which we had to skip, because it was controlled by warlords. At one point we were arrested by suspicion of being mercenaries or spies, but we made it to the ocean.

Make-A-Difference has raised \$1 million and the charity goes from strength to strength. Our focus is on disabled, sick and dying children, and we hope to complete the Angolan part of the journey soon.

Now at 37 years of age, I live in Detroit - Cupid had no respect for geography. I met Carrie, a former nurse, just before the Zambezi trip, and it was 'happily ever after' for me. Her brother came on the expedition and said: "Come meet my family before we go." As soon as I set my eyes on her, I knew that my life was taking a different direction. Before we left I gave her a single, unset diamond. On my return we married and now have two beautiful daughters, Katelyn, two, and Erin, one.

There's not a huge demand for one-armed safari guides in Detroit, so I make my living business coaching and delivering keynote speeches. I tell people to get off their backsides. I want to pass on what that hippo and Dr. Ncube taught me: Don't become a victim of your circumstances. Live the life of your dreams.