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News

LUCKY AMERICAN SURVIVES HIPPO ATTACK

By **Knight-Ridder/Tribune**
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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Zambezi River guide Paul Templer got a whiff of doom when a 4,000-pound hippo snatched him from a canoe and swallowed his head.

"I went straight down his throat, which is probably closer than one wants to get to a hippo," the 27-year-old Zimbabwe resident, formerly of Michigan, said last week. "It smelled like death. It was pretty dark."

Templer is able to speak with some detachment and humor about surviving three slashing attacks by a rogue hippo. He counts himself lucky to be around to talk about it.

His encounter with the angry hippo cost him an arm. Its daggerlike tusks pierced Templer's chest under his left armpit. The deep bite severed but sealed a chest artery, preventing Templer from bleeding to death in the river.

The attack occurred at one of the most scenic spots in the world, on the sparkling Zambezi River about half a mile upstream from where Devil's Cataract splashes 300 feet over Victoria Falls. Templer was guiding home a river safari in the peaceful late afternoon of March 9. Three canoes and a kayak made up the safari.

Each canoe carried two tourists and a paddler. The kayak had only a trainee paddler. Templer, a registered river guide, paddled the lead canoe.

"We were coming down the river, turned around a corner, and I saw a hippo with a calf," he said. "So I decided to avoid that."

Wildlife experts say hippos kill more people each year in Africa than any other animal. A hippo with her calf is the most dangerous of all. A rogue male injured in a territorial fight with another male hippo or by poachers also is extremely dangerous.

"There was an alternative channel we could take," Templer said. "I knew there was a rogue male hippo, about 2 tons. He was usually way downstream from where he was that day. Two of us crossed over into the shallows, and the third canoe got hit in the back by the hippo."

The rogue surged under the canoe, lifted it up, knocking paddler Evan Nemasango, 25, into the river. Templer paddled backward to rescue Nemasango, who had just completed training to be certified as a river guide.

"I bent over to grab ahold of him. The hippo came up between the two of us and took me out of the canoe. I went straight down his throat."

"Talk about lucky," Templer said. "Of the bites on my back, I've got seven vertebrae that he messed with. And he just scratched along the surface and didn't break the spinal cord or anything. When he bit into my lungs he missed my heart. He missed my liver and kidneys.

"He shook me a lot and let me go. Fortunately we were in quite shallow water, and I swam to the surface."

By the time he surfaced from the first attack, Templer said, "My paddler was in quite a state. I grabbed ahold of him. . . . I was swimming backward going into the shore."

As he swam, Templer reassured Nemasango: "Relax, Evan. Don't worry. He's gone. We'll get in." But the hippo struck a second time.

"Oh, here we go again," Templer recalls saying to himself. "The hippo dragged me down. He hit my legs and took me under. I let go of the paddler because the hippo was giving me good attention under the water. That is the last time we saw the paddler.

"I remember sitting under water thinking, 'I wonder who can hold their breath the longest.'"

Despite his swimming abilities, Templer could not hope to outlast the hippo under water. Hippos can go without breathing for several minutes at a time, long enough to stall anyone



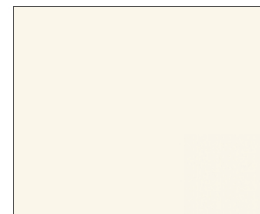
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hippos can go without breathing for several minutes at a time, long enough to stomp across river bottoms.

"I'm in my basic survival instinct -- kicking, screaming and scratching," Templer said, recalling his reaction to the second attack, "although there wasn't much screaming because it was under water. Then he let me go again after he had taken bites.

"I surfaced again and started swimming toward some rocks. I thought that would be the safest spot I could get to. Never in a million years did I think he would hit again. We have never, never heard of hippos doing what this one did. This was a complete freak accident."

During the first two attacks, Templer struggled to pull a .357-caliber Magnum from a holster dangling from his belt. The weapon, standard for a river guide, was loaded with bullets that had "monolithic heads so they had enough stopping power," Templer said. "I just couldn't get to it."

When the hippo attacked a third time, Templer went for his gun again. The hippo beat him to the draw.

Templer usually carried the firearm in a holster. But the strap broke about five minutes into the canoe trip.

"I put the holster in my belt and put my gun in my lap so I could get to it rather quickly," he said. "The hippo stripped the sidearm off me on his third go. He bit through my pants and my underpants but left me intact. I've got every reason to be grateful.

"Then he hit me pretty much on the side of my torso. I got chewed up pretty bad. This time he had a very good bite. When he let me go, I managed to make it to some rocks where it was too shallow for him to carry on. . . .

"Never once during the whole thing did I think I was going to die. That is the adrenaline kicking in."

The remaining canoe paddler rowed Templer to shore, where a medical rescue team rushed him to nearby Victoria Falls Hospital.

A nightmare afternoon turned into a lucky night for Templer. Dr. Layton Nyoni, a specialist in shock trauma treatment, was on duty.

Nyoni treated Templer for shock. Then he phoned Dr. Bekithemba Neube in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, who operated for five hours after a four-hour ambulance ride south from Victoria Falls.

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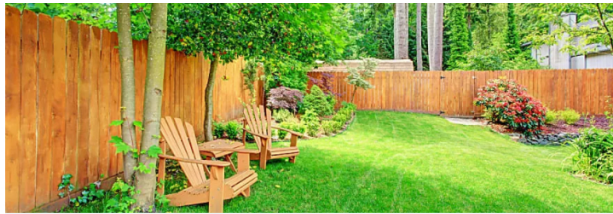
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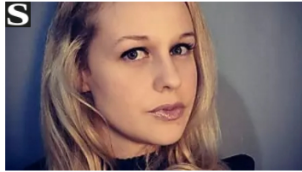
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