

Reader's Digest Article

John Dyson 1996

Welcome to the mighty Zambezi!" Paul Templer said to the six tourists he was about to lead on a three-hour canoe trip down one of Africa's longest rivers. Heading towards Zimbabwe's thundering Victoria Falls, the group hoped to see elephants, crocodiles and hippopotamuses along the way. It was a perfect afternoon last March, with a blue sky and a cooling breeze.

The 27-year-old guide briefed the three couples. "We call it the 'royal drift' because we do the paddling and your job is to sit back and relax," Templer said. Then he motioned towards the .357 revolver in a holster on his belt. "But there are dangers," he warned. "The river's full of crocodiles, so don't trail your hand in the water. It will look like a fish and that's what crocs snack on. The next hazard is hippos," Templer continued. "Hippos are territorial, so we know which areas to avoid. But a hippo having a bad day might decide to bump your canoe."

Templer grinned as his clients gasped. "A big hit could tip you into the water. If that happens, don't panic," he continued. "Hippos won't eat you. They're vegetarians." Templer's team included freelance canoeing guide Mike McNamara, 31, who was accompanying the group in a kayak, and canoe paddlers Ben Sibanda, 24, and Evans Namasango, a cheerful, hard-working 22-year-old who had recently taken the exams to qualify as an apprentice guide. Templer had liked Namasango from the start, and tutored him almost every day.

Templer divided the tourists. In his boat were Jochem Stahmann and his wife Gundi, from Bremen, Germany. In Sibanda's canoe were Murielle Fischer and her fiancé Pere Lagardère, while Nathalie Grassot and Marc Skorupka travelled with Namasango.

Templer's heart was singing as the little flotilla pushed out into the Zambezi's gentle current. He had grown up with one foot in the bush, living mainly on remote military bases. His father had been an officer for the former British colony of Southern Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe.

With the beefy shoulders of a butterfly swimmer and the strong build of a rugby full-back, Templer was a gifted athlete with a streak of recklessness. While working in Israel, for instance, he tried to drive a tractor across a minefield into Jordan to buy beer. The prank got him expelled from the country.

Back home in Zimbabwe, he was camping with friends on the shore of Lake Kariba when a canoe safari went by. That's the way to go! he told himself, and passed the stiff exams required to become a professional river guide. Templer was made for the job and for more than 18 months he had been overseeing canoe trips for Frontiers Tours. As a professional guide, Templer's job was to bring tourists and wild-life together; the trick was to keep them apart. Once he intercepted several Japanese visitors as they were walking up to some lions, cameras clicking.

And there were hippos, one of Africa's most dangerous animals. In a bull hippo, the two central lower teeth, up to eight inches long, point straight out like the bars of a forklift truck. And the two massive canine teeth curving down from the top of the jaw slide against the two jutting up from the bottom, keeping them sharp like the blades of hedge cutters.

Every so often the hippos bumped a canoe, sometimes spilling passengers into the water. One guide had lost a leg to a hippopotamus two years before. And only six months ago, a big bull hippo suddenly smacked the bottom of Templer's canoe, catapulting him and two passengers into the water. The same hippo chased and bumped other boats as well. Soon the river guides, a close-knit group, were passing word about the rogue's locale so that it could be avoided. But now, as Templer led the flotilla through a gauntlet of rocky islands, he did not know that the rogue hippo had moved. He was leading his flotilla straight to the animal's new territory.

Just a paddle's length from the shoreline of an island, Templer's canoe drifted lazily. In 40 minutes, Templer knew, the tourists must be at the landing where a truck would take them back to their hotels.

McNamara bumped his kayak down a wide foot-high ledge of rock over which the river cascaded into a pool about 200 feet across. Sibanda, angling into the current, was next, with Templer and then Namasango following close behind. Templer rapped on his canoe to encourage any hippos hidden below the water to surface, so that the paddlers could

avoid them. Suddenly there was a noise like a thunderclap. Bam! A bull hippo hit Namasango's canoe, throwing the back end three feet into the air and sending Namasango tumbling out.

Templer whipped round in his seat to see the back of Namasango's canoe on the shoulders of a hippo—the rogue hippo. The beast opened its huge mouth, then submerged abruptly. As the canoe's two remaining passengers, Grassot and Skorupka, fought to keep it level, Namasango bobbed up in the water, gasping. "Hold on, I'm on my way!" Templer yelled, back-paddling his canoe towards Namasango. Templer positioned the back of his canoe within Namasango's reach. The hippo won't return, he told himself. The Stahmanns leaned to the right, balancing the canoe as Templer twisted left and leaned out of the boat, extending a hand for Namasango to grab.

Their fingers were just inches apart when the hippo exploded out of the water between them like a pick-up truck with its bonnet open. In an instant, the hippo took Templer into its mouth head first. Its huge upper teeth pierced his armpits, then punctured the small of his back, pinning both arms to his sides. Then the beast disappeared beneath the surface again.

So cleanly did it happen that Templer's canoe remained upright for one long moment before it slowly toppled, dumping the Stahmanns into the river. Pulling Templer 12 feet under water, the hippo played with the 200-pound man like a dog with a rag doll. Templer, face down inside the hippo's mouth, didn't know where he was. Everything was black. Am I inside something? he wondered. Suddenly the vice-like pressure came off Templer's chest. As the hippo opened its jaws, Templer got one arm free and felt around wildly. His fingers felt the hard bristles of the hippo's snout.

Jackknifing his body to get leverage, Templer pushed with all his might. He felt strangely calm, as if watching himself in a film. His other arm came free, and he found a leathery lip to push on. The hippo's teeth gashed his cheeks and the back of his head. Suddenly, it released him, and Templer swam towards the light. His head shot above the water's surface, blood gushing down his face. The first thing he saw was Namasango, gasping and struggling to tread water.

"Swim, Evans! We're going to the side!" Templer yelled. But Namasango seemed to be in shock. So Templer took his chin in the crook of his bloody elbow and pulled him towards the river bank. Suddenly Templer felt his leg pinned by an enormous weight—the hippo was back! This time it grabbed Templer from below, its big sharp

tooth boring into his foot, pulling him under. Templer released his grip on Namasango, hoping he would reach the surface. A hippo can stay underwater for six minutes. Templar knew that but also realized that he could only last three or four.

In a frenzy of desperation, Templer kicked and clawed at the hippo's snout. His trapped leg came free but now his arm was jammed in the beast's mouth. Templer summoned his ebbing strength for more blows on the bristly snout. Let go of me! And suddenly, it did.

When McNamara saw Templer's head break the surface, he swung his kayak towards him. "Swim to me!" he shouted. But the hippo got there first. Thrusting its body half out of the water, the beast snatched Templer's torso in its jaws. Templer's head and shoulders hung out of one side of the hippo's mouth, his legs out of the other. His left arm was slashed between a pair of scissoring canines and two teeth bored into his chest. Templer felt his ribs being splintered.

In a frenzy, the hippo started dunking Templer in and out of the water. A yard-long jet of bright red blood spurted from Templer's side as the hippo's teeth cut an artery.

Templer felt his body being whipped left and right, up and down. With his free hand he tried to reach his revolver but discovered that it was gone. He was out of breath, and his mind was beginning to blur. But he continued to fight, punching the hippo's hide with his free hand.

Suddenly, the hippo gave up. It spat Templer into the water and left him. He bobbed up next to the kayak. "Get me out of here," he mumbled to McNamara, grabbing the rope. As McNamara pulled him to shallow water, Templer's first thought was to rescue the people he was responsible for. "We have to get them to the bank," he said, gasping. "Where's Evans?" Fischer and Lagard?re saw Namasango appear on the surface about 50 yards downriver. He waved his arm above his head, then sank. The hippo, leaping like a horse, burst out of the water and landed on the spot where Namasango had just been. Then the pain hit Templer, and he slumped in the water. "It chewed me up pretty bad," he said, groaning.

Inside Templer's tattered left sleeve, McNamara saw a mess. The upper arm was crushed in two places, the lower part stripped of flesh. He'd lost a lot of blood from the wounds in his chest, and his left foot was crushed to a pulp. One lung was visible through a gaping hole in his back.

The first-aid box and two-way radio were lost when Templer's canoe overturned. When they got him to the sandbank, Templer complained that he could feel his lungs filling with blood. McNamara ripped the wrapping off their snack food and sealed the holes in Templer's chest, hoping to prevent his lungs from collapsing. Sibanda snatched up his paddle. "Go!" McNamara told him. In six minutes of hard paddling Sibanda reached the landing. By chance the local medical rescue team was conducting an emergency drill. They drove Templer to the local hospital, but it had no surgeon. The nearest one was 270 miles away in Bulawayo.

When Templer arrived there at 1am, orthopaedist Bekithemba Ncube, 41, was waiting. The patient was a mess, but it could have been worse. Had the axillary artery in one armpit not been cut so cleanly that it sealed itself, Templer would have bled to death in less than a minute. Had the massive puncture wounds in his back not been made at an angle, which created flaps that stopped air leaking into his chest, his lungs would have totally collapsed. In a seven-hour operation, Ncube patched him up and amputated the damaged left arm.

Evans Namasango's body was found downriver after two days of searching. Along the mighty Zambezi, none of the old-timers can recall a hippo attack as long or as fierce as the one Paul Templer survived. Undaunted, the river guide, now fitted with a prosthetic arm, has returned to the bush to run expeditions in Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana. Although professional hunters urged the Zimbabwe Department of National Parks and Wildlife to shoot the rogue hippo, it is still in the river—waiting.