

## MAN-TRAP

I had been here before. That was back in 1985, the site where I had my first house search. Remember.

Adrian was insisting he drag me off to check out Forest Pools. Reckoned that he had some hot info that some men on horses had gone on up the Puketi River early that morning after kukupa. I sighed and reluctantly set aside my backlog of work that I had been trying to get through that morning, thinking that this would be just another waste of time chasing around the hills after phantom horsemen that always seemed to allude us. I was pissed off with them. The last time Ed and I had tried to stop one in the dark there a couple of weeks ago the prick tried to run us down.

On that particular evening we had just gone in to the deep valley, sombre and cold in the early winter evening with the river winding through the steep near vertical clefts in the forested hills, wreathed in soft and misty clouds. It was particularly cold that day. We had arrived just before dark to check the old forest track wedged between the river and steep banks, finding the tracks of a single horse heading up river, quite fresh. Had to be earlier that day.

We pulled our vehicle back around out of sight a couple of hundred metres and hunkered down beside the track to wait and see what eventuated in the gathering dark, knowing full well that if he was coming out he would be here in the next hour.

Thirty minutes later my feet were beginning to go to sleep as I hunched down on the edge of the track, mosquito's hovering around the back of my neck in the dark. We had moved down into an old and deep rut on the edge of the road that offered good concealment yet put us right on the edge of a narrow piece of the road, leaving nowhere for the horseman to go if he came through. That was providing he used the road and not the river.

The river noises played tricks here. One moment they were normal, the next moment you believed you could hear footfalls, but it always turned out to be the eddying sound waves of the water trickling over stone. My mind had settled into a numb euphoric blankness as the cold chilled my spine. The dog got to within three feet of us before he stopped with a grunting snort, snapping my mind into overdrive and standing the hairs up on the back of my neck. Shit..!

The grey shape stood its ground about two feet from Ed's leg, a quiet low growl rumbling in its mongrel throat. Backing off slowly, vanishing into the darkness. A ghost.

The dog had to have alerted him. The air seemed dead still as if holding its breath waiting. A click of hoof on stone. My heart thumped in my chest. I strained to listen above the sound of blood pumping past my eardrums. Nothing... Then I could smell the damned horse..!

I felt Ed's hand tap me gently on the leg, making sure I knew the horse was there. I tapped back. He must be just around the corner and spooked. Wondering what had sent his dog scurrying back to warn him. A long three minutes elapsed. Then another click of hoof on stone. The bastard was moving the horse up just one step at a time. Letting the animal tell him what was there waiting. The smell of damp sweating horse wafted strong in my nostrils, my eyes watered as I tried to pierce the darkness.

Suddenly I could just make out the slight white of a blaze on the horse's nose. Another click of stone. Then the white of an eye as that horse had us cold in his sights. I felt Ed move in a lunge, then all hell broke loose as the ghostly figure looming high above us let out a Yaah...! I heard the breath come out of the horse as the rider kicked it hard in the guts,

bolting forward straight at us. I felt Ed coming backward, sending me sprawling in a heap back down into the rut. Him yelling, Stop! Rangers..! The horse thundered past showering stones over both of us, hooves flailing. Then just the sound of it crashing through the low rubbish on the river bank, splashing into the river as it bore its rider to safety across the 20 metre expanse of water and into the paddocks beyond to distant Rahiri village. Leaving two rather rattled, and somewhat pissed off wildlife rangers standing there in the cold with nothing but the slowly fading smell of horse sweat to hold on to.

And that's why I wasn't that keen when Adrian insisted I go back into that hole with him to check once more, but go back I did.

We arrived at about ten o'clock that morning, driving in and parking on the grass picnic area. Straight away I could see the horse tracks, fresh as they had made their way down the bank into the river crossing from the Rahiri side. The tracks of at least three horses, all going upstream. None coming back.

Following them up the river we could see where they had travelled in and out of the water, avoiding the deep holes. River sand still wet in the deep hoof marks. Adrian and I spent an hour there trying to figure out how we could go about stopping them this time. He was quite keen to get a bunch of the guys together and take it to them in the bush, but I didn't want a bar of that. To me it was too dangerous and gave all the advantage to them. We would be operating in the environment where they were comfortable. Not only that, once in the bush they would probably split up anyway. Besides have you ever tried catching up with a horse on foot even in the bush? And at one strange sound they would bolt.

Why don't we put a fence up across the river? Adrian queried. Corral the buggers in the dark. He mentioned that he had a coil of hurricane fence wire netting at the base. We talked it through some more, then I agreed providing we got Police backup in the operation. So with a bit more time spent sussing it out what gear we would need, that's what we did.

We arrived back at Forest Pools about three thirty that afternoon, along with a bunch of rope, wire netting, spotlights, miscellaneous bits and pieces, and a crew of five including Ed and Murray from Kaitaia. Graham and John from Kerikeri Police would join us at five.

Setting up was a bit of a trick. We decided to sling the hurricane wire on a rope stretched from a tree from the far bank and ran it across the stony river bed, attaching it to the front bulbar of a Toyota Hilux parked on the shingle bank on our side. To the sling rope we hung a florescent "Stop Ranger" sign midway along the span. About thirty metres upstream of the 'fence' we lay a length of inch sisal rope running from bank to bank and buried just under the surface in the shingle. The far end was attached to a stout tree.

At our selected hiding positions we strapped several spotlights to trees about a metre above head height and pointing into the streambed. We were worried that they may try and shoot out the lights, as had happened here some years ago when a ranger was wounded as he turned on a torch when confronting horsemen in probably the very the same situation as we were now contemplating.

We knew the horsemen would come out just after dark as was their habit, and would very likely be moving at pace, if not a gallop because they always considered this to be the danger area. Our idea was that they would ride around the river bend upstream, crossing the buried rope at which point the Hilux driver would reverse and erect the hurricane wire fence in front of the advancing horses while switching on the headlights to illuminate the scene. Simultaneously the spotlights would come on, the buried rope would be hauled taut and tied off effectively corralling in the horses and riders that we fervently hoped would now be in a state of confusion.

Adrian was adamant that they would come down the riverbed, as this was what they had done the last several trips. I wanted to hedge my bets as they could just as easily choose

to use the old road running parallel to the river. Needless to say I utilised a spare length of hurricane wire and slung it across the road between two kanuka trees twenty metres or so away from our vehicle slung river fence, just in case. I left a hard to see small space among the vegetation close to the cliff so as not to block the entire roadway, as was a legal requirement.

We finished our preparations at about a quarter to six just as the dusk was beginning to kick in and set our troops out ready for the wait. Jim had been sent to an observation point about five hundred metres up the road track. He was kited out with a radio fitted with remote mike and earpiece ( as we all were), ready to report any movement. Ed and Murray stashed themselves in vege at the end of the buried rope ready to haul taut and tie it off to stop any retreat. Adrian was with one constable at the Hilux while the second constable and I were tucked in against the bank at a point midway down the 'corral.' I was carrying my portable million-candle power spotlight and battery pack. Mita & Steve were on the far bank to prevent any breakout that way, although unlikely due to the steepness of the terrain at that spot.

And so we waited.....

By seven o'clock the night was black as coal and heavy with oozing tension. Mosquitoes hummed about, driving us all mad as they descended in hordes on our now cold and clammy skin. The water was playing its musical tricks on the drifting night air, tinkling and clonking its way down to the sea. I could hardly see my hand in front of my face. These horses would be running on pure instinct if they came, if our villains hadn't decided to camp out that is.

"Horses coming!".... Jim's whispering voice crackled softly in my earpiece, raising the hair on the back of my neck and the pulse rate all at the same time.

"They are on the road!"

"Are you sure" whispered Adrian.

"Yeah. Definitely..... Two have walked past me. A third one is hanging back waiting I think..... Hasn't past me.. Just sitting there."

There was a quick scramble as we moved to our alternate road fence positions, my constable and I moving to either end of the road fence with Ed and Murray further up with their spare bit of rope ready to sling across the road behind the horses, hunkered deep into the dirt. Waiting.....

It seemed to take an eternity... our eyes straining into the blackness, ears hearing all sorts of night sounds. Then slowly picking up the odd clink of hoof on stone...the odd creak of leather, drifting smell of warm horse, close now and closing on the fence.. Walking quietly, carefully.... Cautious.

I made out the bulky shapes approach where I knew the wire was. Saw the horses stop, probably almost touching the wire barely a metre or two away from me. I switched on the spot... flooding them with blinding light...horses spooking slightly, eyes wild. The constable quietly telling them to get off the horses. They were two lads in their early teens, the elder one placing a hand to knife on belt... swinging his horse ready for flight when Ed appeared like a ghost from the darkness behind him, an iron hand going on the wrist. There were no firearms or packs. Just a bedroll or two slung behind the saddles. Bugger!

We quietly got them dismounted, lights off with Ed and Murray taking control of the horses, the constable walking the boys quietly to his vehicle.

"What's happening Jim?" whispered Adrian on the radio.

"He's still sitting back waiting.... must be waiting for a signal." Jim's whisper was real faint. That guy must be real close to him.

"What the hell are we gonna do now...?" from Adrian.

Then Murray came up with one of his quick and innovative schemes... “Why don’t Ed and I ride back up on the horses and try to get around him. If we can we will send him down to you guys. We’ve got nothing to lose now.”

We had a quick conflagration about it. I was pretty cautious.. worrying about the risk. But Ed was keen so I gave in, telling them to be bloody careful. They mounted up, both having had a mis-spent youth running around on horses at home on their farms... headed off quietly into the darkness. We quietly informed Jim of what was happening and Adrian set off on foot after them for back up. The other constable joined me and we walked about twenty metres or so up from the road fence and waited in the darkness for something to happen.

They walked those horses quietly up the track, eyes peering into ink black night letting the horses pick their way back whence they had come. Adrenalin pumping... After what seemed an eternity Murray made out a slight white shape in the blackness... a white blaze on equine face.. With Ed close behind he walked his mount right on up beside the now slightly turned horse on that narrow track... a bulky shape on its back... got part way past and swung his mount sideways, getting almost behind the ghostly shape, switching on his torch and saying.. “Wildlife Ranger !”

In his torch light, Murray only had a split second glimpse of the swinging single barrel shotgun as it swept up, taking him hard across the shoulder... sending him crashing into the muddy track..knocking the wind out of his lungs...torch spilling into the scrub...blackness...

The grey ghost charged his horse straight at Ed... swinging with the shotgun as he came. Ed went down sideways on his horse...the gun striking a glancing blow on the side of his lantern jaw, stayed in the saddle. The horse and man swept past him breaking into a gallop as they thundered down the track in our direction, taking with him Murray’s now riderless horse which ran in front.

Adrian was all of fifty metres further back down the track, moving at a trot in the dark toward the commotion.. when that riderless horse ran right over the top of him. Pounding him back into the mud like a bug.... sending the horse sideways to crash down the scrub laden bank and into the river with a mighty splash that we heard from where we were.

Ed’s voice cracked over the radio... “He coming your way at a gallop! .. He’s gotta gun !”

The constable and I stood in the dark... waited.

In a matter of seconds we heard him coming... the thudding grunting of hooves and horse hard out... almost on us. I saw the shape looming at me, turned my million candle power spotlight on.... straight into the eyes of horse and flaying rider.. He rode that horse right at me. I dived sideways, seeing his huge form swing a rope at me as he swept past. I swung the spot around as he went, lighting up the fence now only metres in front of the blinded rushing horse.. and yelled.. “Fence on the road !”

The horse never even slowed. The fence taking it around the lower chest and foreleg spilling it over sideways in a heap. In the light I watched his mount perform a perfect arc into the air, pitching some five metres past the tumbled horse... and hitting the road with a ‘thuudd !’ ...motionless.

The constable pounced on him as I ran up with the light... I heard the thunder of hooves and saw Ed rushing up beside me.. doing a running dismount. The now recovering and rather large man was beginning to struggle with the constable. Ed drove down into his ribs with a knee, helping the constable get a nylon strap around those huge wrists. I walked up and ripped the pack from his shoulders. Ferreting around inside I found in the top pocket a rather naked and undignified plucked pigeon wrapped up in a balaclava....Yes..!!