

THE SEARCH PARTY

by Eric Bult

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It was October 1961, the time each year known as “suicide month”; when living conditions for a few expatriates, yet unadjusted to the heat and humidity in the lower areas, gave rise to episodes of semi-madness, progressing in severe cases to contemplation of suicide. Mlanje, a tea producing area to the south of the country, although scenically extremely attractive, lying as it does beside the highest mountain in the whole of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, was regarded as particularly prone to such apparently pointless loss of

life. During the three years which I spent as Officer in Charge of Police in that district it was not only Europeans who took their own lives. I recall several instances when even natives of the area apparently found the life of burden they were no longer prepared to bear.

Late one afternoon a report was received that a well-known resident had left a suicide note stating that he intended to scale the mountain and there end his tribulations. His distressed wife told us that, before the note was found he had simply told her that he intended to buy some wine at the local general store. Enquiries at the store revealed only that the man had indeed purchased a



couple of bottles of wine earlier that day. In the absence of any other information there was no alternative but to organise a search party to climb the mountain in an attempt to locate him. By the time my small group of policemen, with one local resident, was ready to leave daylight was fast fading. As we reached the bottom of the route which I had selected as the most likely one quarry would have taken, only starlight remained.

Despite the amazing brilliance of the stars, starlight alone was insufficient to enable us to follow the track safely; and we were obliged to use lanterns which then ruined night vision. It was well into the small hours of the day when we reach the top of the ridge at the beginning of an extensive plateau before the crest of the mountain. It was here that most climbers decided to claim and ascent of the Mlanje Mountain, for this was the site of several huts built with materials carried at colossal effort some 4000 feet up the self same path which we had climbed. One such hut was the property of the Mountain Club of Nyasaland, of which the local resident of our search team was a member. It was decided to await daylight before beginning a search of the most likely places which the unarmed man (as his wife had assured us was probably the case) would choose for his demise.



There was very little in the hut to afford us comfort. Our meagre and hurriedly prepared food, carried without the usual porters, in addition to such emergency equipment which we had been able to grab, was majestically enhanced by oatmeal and whisky which some eternally-blessed climbers and left in the hut. Our delayed search at the top and bottom of waterfalls, and other likely places where the final plunge might be considered or ended, revealed no trace of our man. Around mid-day we decided to end what was clearly an impossible task in the light of such little information. The downward scramble was achieved very much shorter time than our ascent, notwithstanding that the whisky had long since ceased to urge us onward.

Before arriving at the Police Station to report our arrival and to seek any information concerning our threatened suicide, we called in at the store where the wine has been purchased the previous day by our missing person. Then we realised why our search had proved fruitless. Our quarry had personally been there earlier to confront the storekeeper with a most serious complaint. Having reached the top of the waterfall where he intended to carry out his stated intention, he opened his bottles of wine: They were both “corked”!

Eric Bult 2008

