

Iraq vet joins battle against rhino poaching

MATTHEW SAVIDES

THOMAS O'Sullivan has faced gunfire and mortar on the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq during his 15 years with the Royal Marines. Now he has South Africa's rhino poachers in his sights.

Last week O'Sullivan started training rangers at the Thula Thula game reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal.

His three-week stint is part of volunteer work with a UK-based charity, Veterans For Wildlife.

His first encounter with the reserve's two rhinos, Thabo and Ntombi, made him realise that he was doing the right thing.

"I just thought that if my little girl, Evie, would not be able to experience something like this it would be a travesty," he said.

He also realised that not even 15 years in the military had prepared him for what would happen next.

While he and filmmaker Chris Terrill stood watching the animals, Thabo charged at them. They had to run for cover in nearby trees.

"If he was an insurgent, I would have known what to do," O'Sullivan said.

Last week the Sunday Times patrolled the reserve's perimeter fence with 31-year-old O'Sullivan. It quickly became obvious that his skills could make a huge difference in helping the reserve's anti-poaching teams.

O'Sullivan is a trained

sniper and specialised as a platoon weapons instructor. He is also an expert in close combat.

"I spent a lot of time hunting terrorists, criminals and soldiers, and this is exactly what the guys here are doing," he said.

"They're hunting poachers. Also, as part of my job in the military I taught people how to do that, so it transitions quite easily from the military in Britain to teaching the rangers here to find the poachers.

"The more proficient they can be, the more results they'll have. And the more results they have, that will get out into the community. They'll catch loads [of poachers] and then not very many, and then, hopefully, none because the community will know the reserve is being patrolled properly."

O'Sullivan has been teaching the rangers how to get close to the poachers without being seen.

Thula Thula is also home to a herd of about 31 elephants.

After working briefly with the 24-man team, O'Sullivan realised the project would not be without its challenges. Discipline was lacking and there was no specialised anti-poaching unit.

"These guys are doing a job they aren't trained to do. So the first thing we have to do is put systems and structures in place to ensure they can do their jobs effectively. They are also under-equipped."

Thula Thula this week took the difficult action of dehorning Thabo and Ntombi to further



BUSH DOCTOR: Veterinary surgeon Mike Toft is an old hand at working with rhinos. Here he prepares to take DNA from a dehorned rhino at the Thula Thula private reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal
Pictures: ROB WHITE



ON PATROL: Former Royal Marine Tom O'Sullivan, below, is whipping an anti-poaching unit in Thula Thula into shape. He is a volunteer with Veterans For Wildlife



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thwart poachers.

While Thabo was being dehorned, O'Sullivan monitored Ntombi's breathing rate after she had been sedated.

"I'm not a crying type, but it was difficult not to get emotional. It's sad that these are the lengths we have to go to save

these animals," he said.

The reserve's owner, Françoise Malby-Anthony, said O'Sullivan's involvement would drastically change how Thula Thula's security teams worked.

"The new techniques and the military training he has brought in have been absolutely phenomenal. He's brought discipline, organisation and a total restructuring of our entire security force.

"He's been a huge improvement to the security team. It's been an eye-opener, and the future looks really bright," she said.

Another Saturday night and all dressed up in camo...

THE icy wind howled across the 4 500ha Thula Thula game reserve but Evan Spiers and Mike Thomson did not seem the slightest bit fazed.

Rifles in hand, jackets zipped to their chins and clad in full camouflage gear, the pair patrolled the reserve on the lookout for any sign of poaching. As day turned to night and rain fell, they kept walking in complete darkness.

Over the course of nearly four hours in the bush Spiers

and Thomson would cover just shy of 12km. The Sunday Times accompanied them on patrol on Saturday night, and the dangers they face became alarming real.

"Often you can hear their [hunting] dogs, so you know they're inside somewhere. You just don't know where they are. We're surrounded on three sides by local communities, so they can come in from anywhere," said Spiers, the second-in-

command of the reserve's security team.

Apart from poachers and their dogs, the wildlife itself is a danger. Stumbling across the reserve's elephant herd or gang of buffalo could be fatal, especially since the rangers do not use torches on patrol because they could easily be spotted.

None of the reserve's elephants or rhinos have been poached for the best part of seven years — white

rhino cow Heidi was killed by poachers in 2009, and one of the rhinos was shot in the leg during a gunfight in 2013 — but that does not mean poaching does not happen.

"We see a lot of poaching for bush meat," said Spiers. "Just a few weeks ago, a wildebeest was shot through the fence."

And as the all-night, all-weather patrols show, the reserve is taking no chances. — Matthew Savides