

# FLYING FOR THE ELEPHANTS

By *Fransje van Riel*

It's a blustery day in the greater Mara ecosystem. Gusts of wind are slapping through the acacia thickets as I climb aboard the little yellow Super Cub and buckle myself in tightly. Watching Marcel Romdane hop into the pilot seat with enviable ease, I absorb the few basic 'dos and don'ts' and sit back as we start taxiing along the recently-built Ol Seki airstrip. 'I'm just warming her up for a few minutes', Marcel's voice crackles over the radio. Pressing the headsets closer against my ears to ensue better communication, I simply nod, feeling just the slightest trepidation. 'If you feel uncomfortable at any time just tell me, okay?' He asks, with slightly raised voice as I hear the engines begin to rev louder. 'Then we go back.... Right then, off we go!'

The plane lurches forward and gaining speed fast, we race across the dirt strip - faster and faster and faster

still before we lift off just beyond the make-shift hanger where the Fly4Elephants plane is normally parked when it's not on anti-poaching patrol flights. My breath catches as I see thousands of wildebeest dotting the plains of the Naboisho Conservancy, moving in long lines like giant trails of black ants. It is an epic scene that stretches out some two-hundred meters below. Once over the woodland, I spot Ol Seki Camp, where Marcel is based, nestled snugly amongst the thick vegetation.

'Look!' Marcel says. 'Down there! See the eles?' I follow the direction of his hand on the right open side of the airplane and see a small herd of bulls moving slowly, their ears flapping. 'So great to see them safe and sound!'

Marcel is clearly in his element and it is easy to see why. After all, these elephants are the very reason

he left the small town of Flensburg in Germany to settle permanently in Kenya, following German news reports that Kenyan-based NGO's were calling for pilots to help protect the country's elephants. He had never flown a plane before but, determined to make a difference, Marcel paid for lessons and tenaciously set about training to become a pilot in January 2011. He passed his exams and obtained his licence just four months later. 'My instructor wanted to check something out on the plane during my training and that's when I saw this little yellow Piper Super Cub in the hangar. He pointed to it and said "If you are serious about bush flying, that's what you want to get!" I decided there and then to buy the little plane to help save the elephants', Marcel explains.

Marcel and his girlfriend, Nicole Tepperies, moved to Nairobi shortly



Locals of the Naboisho Conservancy looking at a Fly4Elephants plane.

afterwards where they spent frustrating weeks looking for an NGO to offer Marcel's services to before the Super Cub arrived in the country.

'I approached many different organisations, asking only for financial assistance to cover the cost of fuel, but most were either unwilling or unable to help me', he says. 'I couldn't understand it, as this was what they'd been asking for in the German media. That's why, in June 2012, I decided to found my own organisation, Fly4Elephants'.

And it wasn't a moment too soon. 'In October 2011 I came face to face with my first elephant, a magnificent bull known as Lekuta, who had been speared with poison for his ivory', Marcel reflects pensively. 'He was found dragging himself around with a terrible

injury for about two weeks. The KWS vet came in to treat him and afterwards we stayed with Lekuta for several hours to make sure he was okay following the anaesthetic. It was heart-breaking to see him get up after some time before slumping down again. As we left the scene in the evening to silently drive back to Ol Seki Camp not many words passed between Nicole and I, as both of us were trying to deal with those overwhelming new feelings. I had taken thousands pictures of elephants over last 6 years and had always seen their beauty and majesty, but never the suffering and tragedy. The worst was the knowledge that it was us humans who had done this to him. That night was a sleepless one for me. Was I really up to this? Could I watch my beloved

elephants die? How much would die of me with them?'

Lekuta died about a week later. 'I have never heard of an elephant to survive from a poisoned spear since', he says. 'They just wander around, suffering terribly as the poison spreads in their system. A month after that I witnessed my first elephant being shot in order to put him out of his misery.'

Marcel recounts the sad tale. 'He was an unnamed bull that had been speared twice. The day before the decision was taken to end his life, a herd of elephants came by and stayed with him, circling around him', he tells me. They were obviously comforting and touching him with their trunks. 'Watching the KWS guy shoot this poor elephant was one of the worst things



Pilot Marcel Romdane standing next to one of the Fly4Elephants planes



Marcel Romdane standing next to a wounded Elephant.

I'd ever experienced in my life. I'll never forget how the ranger climbed on top of the tranquilized bull's head and stuck the heavy nozzle of his heavy G3 machine gun in his ear before pulling the trigger. All the while the five big bulls that had been safeguarding and consoling him were standing close by, watching our every movement when trying to save him. When the gun released the bullet they silently turned around and slowly walked away, leaving me with a feeling of failure and guilt...'

There have been other tragedies too. Earlier this year, towards the end of February, a fifteen-year-old bull, Toto, whose story was followed by thousands on Facebook, collapsed and died close to where Lekuta had taken his last breath – within hundred meters of the Naboisho warden's home. He'd been treated by KWS several times

and appeared to be doing well until the poison eventually caught up with him six long-suffering weeks later. Toto, too, was visited by a large herd of elephants before he died – some 150 – with five or six elephants remaining close to him and being reluctant to leave.

'They were putting their trunks around him, squeezing and hugging him, but when they wanted to leave, Toto cried out, and the herd responded by coming back one last time. Then they left for good, the evening before he died', related Marcel.

But tragic as these incidents are, Marcel had some good news too. 'The elephants are aware of the fact that

we are here to look after them as best we can and there is some evidence to suggest that they are beginning to frequent the Naboisho Conservancy more often to seek solace'.

Landing at a different airstrip more than an hour later, I clumsily climb out of the bright yellow two-seater aircraft feeling an incredible admiration for this man and his single-minded David-and-Goliath vision: To fly and to protect the elephants for as long as he can...

For more information please visit:

[www.fly4elephants.com](http://www.fly4elephants.com)

[www.facebook.com/Fly4elephants](https://www.facebook.com/Fly4elephants)

[www.romdane-pictures.com](http://www.romdane-pictures.com)