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Rhodesia. Beginning to End

Ron Morkel

Part 2.

Clifford Earle Southey Morkel

1910 -1971 (1, p107 - 202)

When Cliff was born in December of 1910 as their sixth child, Arthur and Alice were living on their farm Avondale, five mile north of the Fort Salisbury Kopje. Arthur was away a great deal of the time, building the homestead on Ceres Farm. The family moved there when Clifford was four years old. Arthur was of the old school in believing 'children should be seen and not heard'. He was hardworking and serious and not sensitive towards his five boys, but he provided them with opportunities to enjoy a more comfortable life than his own had been. He had an outwardly stoic nature but possessed a heart of old and was dedicated to his family. He did not play with his children and rarely laughed with them. Alice on the other hand was a loving mother who always made time to comfort the children. When Clifford was young, his brothers were often far away at St. Andrews and his playmates were the black farmworkers' *picinins*.

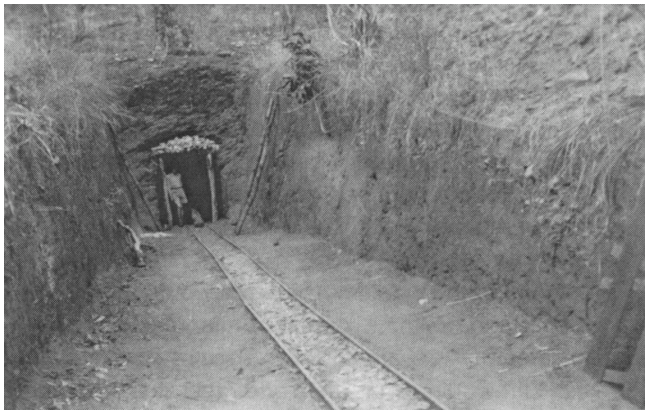
Cliff Morkel *(1, p 105)*

In 1920, at ten years of age, he began making the ten-day railway journey to Grahamstown to St Andrews Prep, and later the College. He was happy at the school and made many friends. He participated actively in rugby and cricket and excelled in track events. He was a passionate reader and matriculated in 1927. He wanted to study law, and signed up as apprentice to a law firm in East London. In 1931 he received the sad news that his mother had passed away and he returned to Shamva and the family farm.

Cliff was keen to become a farmer and worked on Ceres to learn the ropes. His father, Arthur, asked him to accompany him on one of his fortnightly trips to the Fungwe mine to take supplies and rations to the mineworkers and bring back the gold they had recovered. It took most of the day to travel along a rough and dusty road in hot and inhospitable country. They followed the Mazoe river and encountered a massive male lion on the way. Arthur braked suddenly and Cliffs head banged against the windshield. The sudden stop made such a racket that the lion took off across the river. They eventually reached the Fungwe mine around two o'clock in the afternoon in stifling heat. Arthur had done the trip many times, but for Cliff it was a trip to hell, and he thought to himself 'what a miserable existence! I would hate to live here in such isolation.

Arthur employed two white men as supervisors at the mine, who watched over about thirty mineworkers. They came to greet Arthur who brought mail, provisions and brandy. They lived for the brandy, and when they had finished that, drank native beer. There was little else to do. When Arthur made his inspection he was very upset. Since his previous visit, nothing had been done, and in the evening Cliff could hear his father and the two men discussing mine business. He could sense bad blood in their talk. Arthur was up all night and the next morning he called Cliff to sit down and drink a cup of hot coffee, announcing, 'Son, you are going to be a miner. I need you to stay here and oversee the work going on here. I know it is very isolated, but it won't be for long'.

Cliff could not believe his ears. He felt condemned to isolation in a place as close to hell as you can get. He did not try to dissuade his father. Arthur's wish was his command. Arthur took one of the men with him in the lorry and drove down the dusty track, leaving him behind with the other supervisor. Cliff stayed at the mine for five long years. The remaining supervisor unsuccessfully tried to bully and dominate young Cliff, but was too fond of his brandy. On his next visit, Arthur removed this obnoxious man and Cliff was on his own. Although it was isolated, hot and dusty, Cliff found a measure of peace at the mine.



The entrance to the Fungwe Mine, what Cliff dubbed the 'hallway to hell' *(1, p123)*

The black miners knew what to do, and Cliff established a good working relationship with them. At the end of the day's shift, Cliff made sure all were accounted for and then went in with the foreman to inspect and set off the explosive charges. The next morning the fractured rock was removed and fed into the hammer mills, powered by a steam engine. The powdered dust turned into sludge when mixed with water in large circular sludge tanks. From there it went over the vibrating James table where the gold separated out.

Cliff attended to the needs of the mine labourers who needed plenty of food to keep up their strength. With milled mealies they made *sadza*, the thick porridge that is the staple diet of much of Africa. The miners' wives cultivated a vegetable garden and Cliff added meat from the constant parade of antelope that came down to the water pools to drink. What was left after a fresh kill was made in biltong.

On one of Arthur's resupply runs, he brought another white man to help Cliff on the mine and to keep him company. Again, it did not work out. He was a loner that stank of booze. He snored, belched and grunted and talked to himself. Cliff soon found he was illiterate and simply a lost soul with no direction in life, except to get the next bottle of brandy. Cliff slept on a platform outside the hut to avoid sharing with the smelly unpleasant man. One morning he got news that a kid goat was missing and there was the spoor of a leopard. In the night Cliff woke up with a disturbance in the goat's *boma* and managed to kill the leopard to great relief and delight of the mineworkers and their families. Cliff was sad to find that it was an old worn leopard with worn claws and broken teeth.

Arthur removed the old miner and Cliff was again in charge on his own. He worked hard, including weekends so that once a month he could go home to Ceres Farm to relax for a few days. He was the only white person in this part of the hot, cruel, inhospitable Mazoe-Zambezi Valley. Tsetse flies

tormented him during the day and malarial mosquitoes attacked at night. In the still waters and ponds of the river lived the deadly bilharzia parasite. The heat and dust made life miserable. He was able to cool off in a part of the river where the water was flowing actively where there would be no snails and thus no bilharzia. However, Cliff worked hard and with a sense of purpose answering no one but his sense of duty.

He stayed at Fungwe for five years and felt desperate that he could not get away. He imagined his college friends living in Johannesburg and the Cape, going to parties and dances, flirting with pretty women and getting married.

The second World War

Arthur died in 1937 and Cliff stayed on at Fungwe. The following year Reg drove up to the mine with the news that war was imminent in Europe and Britain was actively preparing for war. They requested the colonies to train a volunteer army to protect British interests. It was exciting times and many young men were signing up for military duty. For Cliff it was an opportunity to get away from Fungwe.

Back at Ceres Farm there was a letter from the Government encouraging young men to join up. Greg agreed to look after the Fungwe mine and Cliff set off for the recruiting office in Salisbury. He later described it as 'the turning point and one of the happiest days of his life'. Most men were leaving loved ones and the comforts of home life for the discomforts of the military, while Cliff felt the opposite. It was his chance to close the lonely Fungwe Mine chapter of his life and again rub shoulders and converse with like minded people.

Cliff in uniform *(1, p130)*

Cliff joined the Signals Corps and became an expert in Morse code. He made the rank of Sergeant. It was 1938 and,although Britain had not declared war, it was imminent. He and the other recruits spent months preparing. Cliff's brother Cecil also joined the Army. He was fluent in the native tongue called Chinyanja, the language of the Nyasa people. This skill was needed by the military and Cecil was sent on an officer's training course. Major Cecil Morkel joined the Rhodesia African Rifles (RAR), a battalion of African soldiers overseen by white officers. Reg Morkel continued to manage Ceres Farm, one of the most productive farms in Souther Rhodesia. He was asked to stay on the farm to produce crops for food for the soldiers.

Cliff belonged to the Royal Rhodesia Regiment Company's Armoured Car Section and became their main signalman. They travelled by convoy through Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi) to Nairobi in Kenya. His brother Cecil had been there for some time already and had become acquainted with a young woman in the officer's mess. Sheila Norman came with her parents from Dublin when she was a mere six weeks old. Cecil took Cliff along to play tennis at the Norman's home and Cliff and Sheila met. Despite a twelve-year age difference, there was a spark between them.

A few weeks went by and Cliff's company moved to the war zone. They moved into the North African part of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), occupied by Italian forces. The convoy drove slowly through the countryside without encountering any resistance. The Italians avoided confrontation. Although Cliff was reluctant to talk about it, and joked about the boredom and the Italians' lack of fortitude, he did

see some combat and brought back a few token 'spoils' of war, including an Italian Beretta pistol. In the desert north of Nairobi Cliff began to suffer from excruciating pain in his stomach. They diagnosed a ruptured appendix but were hundreds of miles away from Nairobi. A medic who had been in an operating theatre but with no experience did the operation and he found himself bouncing in the back of a Land Rover for a three day trip back to Nairobi, in terrible pain. The surgeon told him that the medic had done a poor job, but saved his life. He was pumped full of antibiotics and he slowly recovered. His entry scar was round and bigger than a golf ball.

Cliff proudly displaying baby Cynthia *(1, p136)*

Sheila found out from Cecil that Cliff was in the hospital and she visited him daily until he was shipped out via Mombasa to Durban, and from there to Bulawayo. He was given light duties in the signals room while recuperating. He and Sheila carried on an intense love affair by correspondence and decided to get married. She was leaving everything familiar to her for life in a new country where she only knew Cliff and Cecil. In 1941 they married and enjoyed a brief honeymoon at Mermaid's Pool near Ceres Farm. Cliff moved out of the military barracks and they rented a home in Bulawayo. On 12 September 1942 their daughter Cynthia was born. Cliff stayed in the army until the end of the war in 1945., when the soldiers could finally return home to normality. 'One of the happiest days in my life'.

Cattle Ranching

The British Foreign Office launched a program to help returning soldiers to start a new life. Cliff, like many Rhodesian soldiers from agricultural backgrounds wanted to farm the choice was between growing tobacco or cattle ranching. Cliff chose ranching.

He took a low-paying job at Matopos Research Station. a Government farm in the heart of Matabeleland cattle-producing area. Cliff remembered this as a valuable experience. He next worked on Liebig's Ranch near Shabani and gained valuable hands-on cattle ranching experience. There was much to learn - cattle management, breeding, sire selecting, birthing, weaning, castrating, dehorning, inoculating against tick-borne and other diseases, cattle dipping, grazing rotations, supplementary winter feeding, pasture management, water and cattle drinking facilities, pumps and engines, fencing and the many other activities associated with cattle ranching.

Sheila grew increasingly unhappy with the isolation of life on Mazuri Ranch *(1, p154)*

A huge ranch, Rhodesdale Estate in the Midlands of Rhodesia was purchased by the Government and subdivided into viable units for returning soldiers. Cliff travelled to Que Que and met up with Robin Tulloch who had measured up the estate and was a valuable source of information and advice. They drove around for two days and finally drove through the great Dyke at the Vrede gap and the land opened up across a huge *vlei* with a stream, watering hole and grasslands dotted with flat topped acacia thorn trees. The grass shimmered green and succulent from the good rains. Fresh grazing had drawn countless herds of wild game. Cliff stood awestruck. A herd of sleek sable antelope stood alert at the approach of the car. There were hers of zebra and impala and a herd of Tsessebe in the distance. Cliff could hardly believe that this wonderful land could be his. The arrangement was that

the Government would provide the land and some assistance for the rancher to get started, and after some years the farmer could purchase the property on favourable terms.

The property lay between the Ngezi Dam to the north and the Sebakwe River to the south, with the great Dyke as its western border. They named it *Mazuri Ranch* after Swahili (*m'zuri*) meaning 'very good' or 'extremely pleasant'.On the banks of the Sebakwe River stood a small house where Cliff and his family could stay while he built a house on *Mazuri*. He bought a Studebaker truck and went back to Ceres Farm for their belongings. As part of his inheritance he received the cattle herd of Ceres (brother Reg concentrated on crop farming) and he also brought along Starlight, a very spirited black stallion with a white spot on his forehead. Cliff lived in the saddle while he turned a slice of raw Africa into a workable cattle ranch.

Sheila's last day before leaving for Nairobi. L-R:**Cynthia, Sheila holding Tony, & Ron.** *(1, p158)*

There was much to do. The two rivers on the ranch had to be dammed, roads built, a dipping trough to dip cattle, and fencing installed. A borehole was sunk for clean water for domestic use and a house had to be built. Cliff was ready for the challenge. For Sheila the reality of the ranch's isolation started to set in. She had left Nairobi where she was a carefree and pampered girl enjoying an active social life with friends of her own age. Now she had come to settle in a far-off and wild foreign land with no friends, eight rough and dusty miles from the closest neighbour and forty miles to the nearest town.

Cliff was heroic and with the aid of local black workers transformed the ranch dramatically in about six months. The house was still very primitive with only a living room and two bedrooms. The kitchen was outside under a shelter and the latrine an outside 'long drop'.

Other parcels of land were rapidly settled and although the distances were substantial, they made many friends, which developed into a happy hardworking farming community.

Cliff cherished the wild life on the farm and took care to husband both cattle and wild life. He hunted only as necessary and never for sport. He was proud that when he finally retired, the wild life was as prolific as when he started. The sable antelope were special and never hunted. They prized not only the magnificent larger game, but also small animals and particularly the amazing variety of birds on the property.

Source

*1.*Ron Morkel 2010. Rhodesia. Beginning to End. ISBN 145378943X. www.amazon.com, www.bookdepository.com. Our story is extracted from this book.

(More about Cliff in Part 3, where his and son Ron's lives overlap.. The Family Genealogy is at the end of Part 3)