

# A Morning to Remember

By

Gene Palmisano

The pot bubbled vigorously on the camp stove; the vapors of green-chili-chicken soup mingled with wood smoke and damp mountain air.

“There he is again,” my son Ryan said, as the sound of a bugle trailed off in the canyon below our camp.

I added chopped potatoes to the boiling vat and secured the lid. I was exhausted from the morning hunt. We had chased a herd bull, all over the canyon, pressing him with cow calls and bugles hoping to call him in, but like so many bugle shy elk on public lands, he fell silent and disappeared with his cows.

I walked over to the campfire and tossed on another piece of aspen and pulled up a chair when the bull below our camp let out another bugle with a long series of grunts.

“Oh, he’s hot,” Ryan said.

I learned from experience; never turn your back on a bugling bull. That's a costly mistake; the bulls in a given area may fall silent at any time, and that silence could last for days.

"Go put on your camouflage" I said, moving to turn off the camp stove. "We have to go now. Maybe we can get a shot at him before this storm blows in."

In a matter of minutes we were clad for action, toting fifty caliber muzzle loaders we hit the dirt road below our camp and trotted up around the bend as another bugle roared out of the canyon below.

"He's in the dark timber on that slope," I pointed. "We need to hike up the road a couple of clicks where we can drop in below him and get down wind."

A fine drizzle beaded up on my shirt and our breath turned to steam as we trudged along.

The rain had started in earnest by the time we stepped off the road into the canyon. I lead the way moving swiftly yet silently, stepping over twigs and pushing aside brush that might otherwise rake my pants.

The bull let out another bugle, so I cupped my hands behind my ears to pinpoint his location. The rain was coming harder now and the rustle of falling water provided ample cover for our less than perfect stalk. We reached out for bushes and limbs, anything to break our fall as we slid through the mud and wet grass toward a draw below.

Under the cover of thunder, we threw caution to the wind and leaped over deadfall and obstacles in our path. When the thunder subsided we stood stark still at the edge of a gully, plotting a course through the forest maze. The bull let out a roar, and I sprang to life, lurching across the gully with Ryan close on my heels. When the series of grunts fell silent, we found ourselves on our hands and knees, peering up slop through the pine boughs.

The rain and thermals bathed my face with the smell of fresh bull. Quiet as snails we slithered up the muddy slope looking through the underbrush, searching for a horizontal line, the flicker of an ear, or the curve of an antler. I peered around the trunk of a large spruce tree and there stood the bull. I eased back behind the tree, holding my hand against my chest I gave Ryan the thumbs up and mouthed the word, "bull."

I was pinned down by the terrain, so I motioned for Ryan to slide off laterally to a little perch where he could make the shot.

While Ryan slid into position, I caught a glimpse of cows moving across the slope; unfortunately, they saw Ryan before he saw them.

The bull was on the move. Ryan raised his barrel looking for a shooting lane, but soon looked back at me shrugging his shoulders. "Go after him!" I proclaimed in a loud whisper. Ryan stepped forward, his weapon poised. I raised my grunt tube and let out a bugle, hoping to stop the bull for the moment of truth, but the jig was up, and it only encouraged him to flee. The last thing I saw was a huge ass and main beam that evaporated into a menagerie of dark timber.

The rain turned to hail, and a flash of lightning had us cowering under the bows of a small pine tree.

“All I could see was his legs moving through the brush,” Ryan said. “I didn’t have a shot.”

“That’s alright bro. We snuck into his living room, and almost had him,” I said, wiping the water off my face with a wet sleeve. “That was a great hunt.”

“That was cool!” Ryan said. “Another second, this way or that way, and we would’ve had him.”

“Yeah . . . we would have had a dead bull on our hands,” I said. “Look it’s only the first day of the season. If we hunt smart, we should both tag bulls.”

We stood drenched and silent until the hail turned to rain once more. A bolt of lightning blasted over our heads, knocking us to our knees.

“Whoa! That was hairy,” Ryan said.

“Time to bail,” I said. “Let’s head back to camp.”

“Lead the way.”

Our spirits high with the promise of tomorrow, we trudged up and out of the quagmire.

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Mile post seven is a bench nestled amongst a sea of aspens at 9,500 feet; it's the only piece of flat real-estate suitable for camping in the Bear Creek watershed. From our camp it's a thousand vertical feet to the canyon floor and the creek below, and a thousand vertical feet up to the stock drive above.

Come evening the rain subsided and the clouds began to clear. We sat around a pitchy fire, feasting on green chili chicken soup, acorn squash and chocolate-zucchini bread. The sun crept over the horizon rewarding us with magenta hues and pastel clouds that lofted above the canopy of aspens.

Shooting light was fleeting, and with it the hunters. Five or more trucks came down from the high country, pausing at every bend in the road to demonstrate their bugling prowess.

"Ryan, throw that piece of wood on the fire," I said. "And give that Dutch oven a quarter turn."

The fire crackled and popped violently. I jumped to my feet brushing away a hot ember before it burned a hole in my canvas shirt.

"Yeah, this year we're going to do something completely different," I said. "We are going to hunt them instead of trying to call them in."

"Oh . . ."

"I'll bugle alright, but just to find them, then we are going to downwind them, stalk in and kill a bull."

"Let's go!" Ryan said, walking around the fire to escape the smoke.

“We’re not going to waste any time sneaking and peaking either,” I said.

“We are hunting bugling bulls only.”

“I’m so revved.” Ryan said. “I probably won’t sleep a wink tonight,”

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Come morning, two Coleman lanterns lit the pre-dawn darkness. We stood at the table and dined on oatmeal and hot tea as moths and blow flies danced in the light.

“Did you hear that bull?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah, I hear three bulls going at it down there.”

“Are we going after them?”

“Normally I would, but the thermals are all wrong,” I said. “We can’t drop below them; the noise from the creek will drown out the bugles and we won’t be able to locate them. Let’s drive over to the next watershed. I know were some elk are hanging out.”

We drove down the mountain and were greeted by the headlights of several trucks, all in a race to get to the top.

“Where are all these boys going?” I said.

“Do they know something we don’t?” Ryan asked.

“Doubt it.”

“It’s early,” Ryan said. “All The stars are still out,”

“That’s good for us. We need to get two miles up the trail in the dark before shooting light. I want to be on those elk before these other hunters drop in from the top.”

We parked just off the highway, locked the truck and stashed the key. In seconds we were hiking up the trail in the dark. I knew every rock, bend, and rut in the trail, picturing them in my mind’s eye; I raced along, pausing only briefly to let Ryan catch up.

“Are you doing okay?” I whispered.

“I’m right behind you,” he said, illuminating the trail with a green pen-light.

“It could be worse,” I said. “It could be raining.”

We came to a bend where we parted company with the trail.

“This way,” I whispered, and then started bushwhacking quietly through the riparian bramble alongside the creek.

When the predawn light found us, we stood on the edge of a clearing thirty yards above the creek.

“Stop here and charge your rifle,” I said. “Watch for elk on the periphery; anything can happen.”

We dropped our packs and I wiped the sweat from my brow with a folded bandana.

“We need to bushwhack up to the third drainage,” I said. “Up away from this creek so we can hear the bugles.”

We ascended a steep ridge, until we were out of ear shot from the rushing water.

“Time to find them,” I said. Pulling out my grunt tube and diaphragm call,

I let out a subtle two tone bugle. With the exception of biting flies and mosquitos buzzing in my ears, the morning fell silent. After a long pause, I let out a demure cow call then put away my grunt tube. I looked back toward the high country on the other side of the creek expecting a bugle to come from the aspens, but the one that shattered the morning silence came from above. A bull was some seven hundred yards up in the third drainage.

“Let’s go,” I whispered. “We need to find him and close in before he stops buggling.”

We glided up the pathway of least resistance around deadfalls, tiptoeing over the tinder of the forest floor. A jet flew over head and we used the opportunity to cover some ground, our stalk cloaked by a wash of jet engine thrust. When the plane noise faded, we stood silent again, waiting for another bugle, another clue to his whereabouts.

His bugle shook the leaves on the trees, surrendering his location some 300 yards across the drainage. A couple of stellar jays squabbled overhead creating the diversion we needed to stalk ever closer. I froze in my tracks when the familiar silhouette of a deer's rump entered my peripheral vision. It was a doe craning her neck trying to make us out. This was a good sign; it meant our stalk was flawless. However, I couldn't have her spook and bound away, or worse, snort and trigger the alarm that danger is present.

A pine squirrel chattered his giddy life song nearby dropping twigs and pine cones from the forest canopy. It created the perfect confidence decoy, an opportunity to put some distance between us and the doe.

We closed the distance on the bull in a dance of isometrics, shifting our weight from foot to foot, so as not to crush, snap, or rustle anything under foot.

Every time the bull bugled, we abandoned caution and ran several paces stopping only when his grunts subsided. We were close now but his bugles were coming less frequently and he was on the move.

The drainage before us was choked with monstrous deadfalls and brush; crossing it would be a noisy affair.

"Maybe we should cow call him," Ryan whispered. "Maybe he'll come into a clearing so we can get a shot."

"No . . ." I whispered. "He'll just take his cows and run,"

Ever so cautiously, we pressed on. When we weren't climbing over deadfall, we were walking on cow parsnips and tubers that crunched like celery under our feet.

Some time had passed since we last heard the bull and my enthusiasm waned. Did he hear us and flee? Maybe I should have tried the cow call? These questions and more troubled my mind as we gingerly picked our way forward.

Suddenly the head of a cow appeared through the aspens and I dropped to the ground.

"Cow," I mouthed to Ryan who crouched beside me.

A large spruce tree, its bows fanning out, obscured our view so I slid on my ass, five feet off to one side, creating a modest shooting lane. When another cow came into view, I propped up my fifty cal, resting it firmly my arm against my knee. I no sooner shouldered the rifle when the bull trotted into view. I had him cold at seventy yards and was prepared to take a moving shot if necessary, but he stopped short of a small pine tree, turned his head and looked right at me.

KA-BOOM! Through a cloud of acrid smoke I saw the bull collapse and roll down the slope toward us.

"I nailed him!"

We were both on our feet watching the bull. His head came up, his front feet came forward and he jumped to his feet.

“Shoot him again! Shoot him again!” I instructed Ryan as I stepped out of his way.

KA-BOOM!

“Quick, load me up!” I said bracing my rifle between my knees. “Hurry.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s dead,” Ryan said, pouring the powder into the barrel of my rifle.

“I’m not taking any chances.” I said, seating the bullet with shaky hands.

“He’s a big bull,” Ryan said.

“I wouldn’t know; I wasn’t looking at his rack. I was just trying to make the shot happen”

With my gun raised, we moved forward.

“Where is he?” I said. “Did you hit him?”

“I hit him. I’m pretty sure he is over here.”

We moved forward to where the bull had stood up, but no bull.

“Shit! Are you sure you hit him?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Load your rifle,” I said, stooping over to look for sign. I could see where he had tipped over on the first shot and where he rose to his feet. The bull’s tracks

where distinguishable from all others; he tore up the soft dirt when he took off running.

“This is not good,” I said. “He’s running up hill and there is no blood.” I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my gut.

“I’ll stay on his track and you watch for him bedded down out in front of us,” I told Ryan.

At the top of a small ridge, I spotted the first sign of blood painted on some fern boughs and grass stems. When the frequency of blood spatter became more apparent, I began to leap frog forward from one spot to the next.

“It looks like he’s dumping a lot of blood,” Ryan said.

“Not good enough, he’s definitely not hit in the lungs, best we can hope for is if one of us hit him in the liver.”

We tracked him 100, 200, 300 yards, and I was thinking the worst. What if we find him only to have some other muzzle loader putting his tag on him? There will most certainly be a fight; first blood is first blood. I would never consider tagging another hunters animal, and I’ll be damned if someone else is going to tag mine. Like a bloodhound with his nose to the ground I kept moving forward until Ryan grabbed me by the shoulder. Looking up I spotted the bull bedded at about thirty yards, his legs where tucked under him, his head was up, and supported a huge rack.

I shouldered my rifle, took aim and POP . . .

Misfire! Taking my eyes off our quarry, I broke open the breach while Ryan, ever ready with 209 primer, thumbed one onto the nipple. I shouldered my rifle and made eye contact with the bull as he leaped to his feet and tore away from us like a derby thoroughbred leaving the starting gate. I swung my sight pin onto his ass while he dashed for the next county.

KABOOM!

His ass went to ground, tumbling down hill with his front end in tow and didn't stop until he wrapped around a large spruce tree. I reloaded with shaking hands, and we made our final approach. The bull, paralyzed by the running spine shot, was using his front legs trying to get up. I walked right up to him and put one through his boiler room.

"He's a three hundred inch bull." Ryan said.

"310 . . . maybe more," I said. "Yeah baby! I told you we were going to get'em." We hugged each other and I shook Ryan by the shoulders, "I told you, if we stalked them instead of trying to bugle them in, we'd kill one, and there's the proof." I said, as we turned to admire our prize.

"That was cool," Ryan said.

"Yeah, I never shot one at a full gallop before," I said. "From now on this is our new hunting strategy and tomorrow it's your turn."

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