Ten years of the Federation, and certainly a lot of water had flowed under
the bridge, but under Chirundu Bridge particularly. It seemed excessively
so that July, when we motored through on our return to Northern Rhodesia.
The police camp, Customs and Immigration Officers had vanished down the
years and the bush itself had a different face - hotels, petrol pumps and
tarred roads. Only the bridge remained, spanning the Zambesi.

The gleaming frame of the bridge had been my first distant glimpse of
Chirundu back in 1949 and my honeymoon, a ten day journey by barge down the
Zambesi, started at the bush camp on the spot where we now sat and drank
tea in a hotel garden overlooking the river. I was married in October of
1949 – the suicide month - the hottest month in this part of Africa, just
before the rains and my 'going away' outfit was the latest thing in khaki
slacks and a bush shirt. The first morning of my married life was spent in
unromantic mood, driving in a sweltering haze, in a creaking truck,
overloaded with maize, through the Chirundu Escarpment, on a switchback
road cut through great hills, coming down into the valley at Chirundu.

Chirundu was the frontier, marked by the Zambesi River, between Northern
and Southern Rhodesia, and there, a barge waited to take us to our new
home, 150 miles downriver.

I have never forgotten my first impression of that barge, nor my panic at
the thought of getting into it. Against the wide stretch of the river, it
looked so small and - quite inadequate to accommodate 14 paddlers, two
District Messengers, two servants and us; not to mention all the camping
equipment and 30 bags of maize! It was 25 foot long, and amidships
stretched a small, grass roof, shading a plank on which we were to sit for
the following 10 days - made of hardwood, it became obvious.

The paddlers however, seemed to have a knack of packing everything,
including passengers, into space barely adequate for half the amount and,
in less than an hour after we broke camp at Chirundu, everything and
everybody had found a home aboard. To me, the unloading and loading of the
barge at each camp during the journey seemed one up on a conjurer’s hat
trick.

By two in the afternoon of that first day, with the last rifle wedged and
the last water bag securely tied, we pushed away from the bank in blazing
heat towards our first camp at Juanette, 12 miles downriver. We hoped to
reach there before nightfall.

With the first bend in the river behind us and the bridge hidden from
sight, we might have been a thousand miles from anywhere. Thick bush, green
and lush at the water’s edge, faded into a pastel tapestry of muted Spring
colour, rather like an English Autumn. Everything awaited the coming of the
rains.

The river was at its lowest ebb and our course zigzagged from one bank to
the other skirting sandbanks. On the prow of the barge stood the
“pathfinder”, armed with a long pole, sounding the depths and indicating
our course to the captain sitting in the stern. Even so, with the Zambesi
as low as it then was, we did run aground several times when, to my horror,
the paddlers leaped overboard to push the barge free of the sand, at the
same time shouting and beating the water to scare off lurking crocodiles. I
stopped worrying about this performance after a few days, as I occasionally
saw large parties of villagers wading across the river at shallow points, thrashing the water with sticks and shouting, but otherwise unconcerned.

All the songs of the paddlers at first hearing sounded alike to me - a repeated scale practice of three or four notes and it took me quite a little time to recognise one song from another. The paddlers maintained their rhythm with a double beat of the paddles against the side of the barge on each stroke, the pace being set by the tempo of the chant, harmonised in several keys.

Barely out of sight of Chirundu, I saw my first crocodile - 12 feet of him, sunbathing on a sandbank. I must confess I felt the barge to be even smaller than it was as I watched him slide into the water. Then there were the hippo, schools of them grunting and wallowing in the river, the sandbanks churned by their monstrous bodies. They watched our passing with their small, curious eyes just visible above water, their ears perked up like terriers. And all the birds in creation seemed to hover over the Zambesi - every colour, all sizes and a million voices, rising in started warning as the barge slipped through the water.

That first day on the river was quite unforgettable. I had left London only six weeks before and everything was strange and exciting: the songs of the paddlers; the rhythmic beat and dip of their paddles; the sweltering heat and blue glass sky and the bush teeming with an unseen life, watchful and hostile. And I remember Salome, by Boxer puppy, driven frantic by the new sounds and smells, trying to dig her way out of the gauzed cage, protecting her from the tsetse fly.

Equally vivid is my memory of the first night’s camp in the African bush. As the barge swept into the bank at Juanette, the most unearthly noise suddenly broke the stillness. I can only describe it as a high-pitched, screaming yodel, “The welcoming committee”, my husband reassured me, just in time to stop me from grabbing the first weapon to hand.

The African women from the nearby village, hidden amongst the trees, eyed me curiously as we stepped ashore; perhaps some of them had never seen a European woman before - and one wearing trousers at that. And the unearthly yodelling continued as they surged behind us up the steep footpath into a clearing in the bush - our camp for the night. The paddlers, like a colony of ants, sped to and from the barge and it seemed but a short time before the cleared spaced looked quite habitable. Tents were up, beds made, mosquito nets tucked well in and two blazing fires crackled at either end of the camp.

A deputation of men from the village arrived to greet us, led by the headman. They squatted on the ground and for several minutes kept up a soft, rhythmic clapping. Before the end of this journey, I saw several of the varied greetings of the village people; the slapping of the thigh, the patting of the ground, the shuffling of the feet in the dust like a boxer working his shoes in the resin - but all the same, gentle rhythm.

In the sudden, swift-gathering dusk, the women swayed up from the river, heavy water pots balanced on their heads and soon I was scrubbing myself free of the dust and grime of that first day’s journey in Zambesi water, heated over the camp fire.

It was an odd sensation, I remember, squatting in a steaming tin bath in the middle of the African bush. I was surrounded by a roofless grass screen; my sponge bag, reminding me of gleaming tiles and H & C hung on a forked stick, stuck into the ground beside me, looking grotesquely out of place. Above me, the stars, gigantic and brilliant in a purple sky seemed
within reach of my hand – certainly the shooting sparks from the fire must have touched them. I felt a lifetime away from London and its crowds and bustle.

As we finished our dinner in the light of the camp fire and hurricane lamp, from the distance sounded the rhythmic beat of the drums and the answering chant of the village women, rising and falling on the night air and swelling in volume, as they made their way through the bush towards the camp. They streamed into the clearing in a long ‘Conga’ line, shuffling, stamping and kicking up great clouds of dust with their bare feet, followed by the piccanins, making up in noise for what they lacked in size. I was a little disappointed in my introduction to African village dancing. It reminded me a little of a rugby scrum, the effect heightened somewhat by the village headman and his whistle, barely audible above the noise; to the toot of the whistle the dancers changed step, changed direction or stopped completely.

At nine o’clock, with the dust settled, we were in bed, the camp a playground of jumping jack shadows in the leaping flames of the fires. But I found it difficult to sleep that first night in camp. As I lay abed, I gradually became aware of a subdued roar which slowly blotted out the silence – a million voices of cicadas and crickets, the barking of the baboon, the croak of frogs and the squeals and calls of unidentified creatures. Once I became aware of it and listened, I found it deafening. In fact, it took me quite a long time to accustom myself to the noise of the African bush after dark.

Tea arrived with a very chilly dawn and, wrapped in thick dressing gowns, we crouched over the fire and watched the sunrise over the Zambesi. Hollywood may have used all the words but its most perfect technicolour could not product this incredibly beautiful sight. A changing curtain of colour shimmers against the purple hills with the bush drenched in a bronze glow and the river, silver through the early mists, reflects every shade. Even the bush is paralysed into an expectant silence until the sun breaks through signalling the start of another day – and the noise of all creation. Even the hippo barely makes himself heard once the birds really tune up. The African bush is far from silent.

A quick breakfast, up camp and away and, with small variations, this was the general pattern of our nights in camp. By six thirty each morning we were back on the river, rarely stopping for lunch. We averaged 15 miles a day, making camp each evening either at villages on the river banks or on sandbanks in the middle of the river. As the barge passed the grass hut of the villages, perched up on the banks, out would stream the women and the piccanins, calling to us with that ear-splitting yodel, keeping pace with the barge, sometimes for a mile or more along the bank and drowning out the songs of the paddlers.

With the first 30 miles behind us, we began to see more signs of the game down from the dry hills in search of water, their paths trampled flat to the river’s edge.

The elephants’ watering place was easy to recognise. A small typhoon would have damaged the bank less. And often with the paddlers resting and the barge drifting silently through the water, we surprised buck drinking, quite unaware of our approach.

Fifty miles downriver, and in the middle of nowhere, we met up with a fishing party from Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia and stopped to chat. One of the two men was accompanied by his two sons of seven and nine. They had been promised this fishing trip for two years, dependent on good school
reports. It was amusing to see these youngsters in their shorts and bush jackets, armed to the teeth with Boy Scout knives, their topees looking far too big for them. I remember thinking of my small nephews in England. What would they not have given for a trip like this: to camp in the bush, alive with game; real elephants, lion and rhino; and fish in a river teeming with hippo and crocodile. The boys seemed to take it quite casually but I was amused to see how very keen they were to have their photographs taken, in full hunting kit, against a background of camp and bush, knives pulled well to the fore. I later sent them a print of the photograph and I can imagine with what aplomb they exhibited it the first day back at school.

It was on the Southern Rhodesia bank too that I saw my first elephant – or rather my first 47. I counted that many before I took to my heels. We had stopped to make tea and rest the paddlers and had walked up the bank to stretch our legs before re-embarking. There, 150 years from the bank stood the elephant. The wind was in our direction and we were able to approach to 40 years to watch them from the cover of a dead tree. Some of the herd were taking a sand bath and a storm of sand was being kicked, tossed and showered in all directions. There were quite a few calves and, remembering all I had ever heard or read of elephant mothers and their young, I felt decidedly nervous. I did take a photograph but, unfortunately, only the two nearest elephant can be seen in this. The rest are a blurred mass (probably due to my unsteady hand) and nobody believes that the blurred mass is all elephant.

The peace was suddenly disturbed by the shouts of a file of villagers approaching the river bank from beyond the herd. Having sighted the elephant, they were making as much noise as possible to announce their coming and persuade the herd to move off. One great bull raised his trunk and took the wind and in a second his trumpeting was echoed by half the herd. His enormous ears flapped and one gigantic foot came up. It was at this point that I ran and didn’t stop until I reached the barge. I felt a little silly when my husband and the servants arrived within minutes, walking at an easy pace, my husband eyeing me reproachfully.

As we pushed out into midstream, the natives who had started the commotion reached the river bank, having skirted the elephant without interference, to my complete astonishment. I heard later that this was not uncommon – the unmolested elephant in normal circumstances is not a vicious animal and, warned of the approach of man with obviously peaceable intentions, judging by the noise he makes to announce his presence, the herd will seek new pastures.

I heard many of these elephant stories on that journey. Five days downriver we stayed at the camp of a Game Ranger who had, in the course of his work, shot many. When we arrived he was weighing a 90 lb tusk of one shot that morning. From his camp he supervised a squad of native hunters, controlling the movement of game over an area of roughly 400 square miles. Game carried tsetse fly which fed on their blood; the tsetse carried the deadly germ of sleeping sickness to man and beast. Part of the campaign against sleeping sickness was to prevent the migration of fly. The tales of elephant hunting around the table that night were never ending and I went to bed even more terrified at the thought of the herd I had seen than I had been when watching them.

It was at the Ranger’s camp that I had my first lesson in handling a rifle and, after an hour of instruction, took a shot at a bottle perched on a tin at 50 yards. The kick of the rifle – a 9.5 mm nearly threw me over – but the bottle shattered into a thousand pieces. On hitting a white bag nailed to a tree at 100 yards, the Ranger offered me a job on the spot. I rested
on my laurels, nursed my bruised shoulder in secret and never heard the end of beginner’s luck.

And slowly down river we travelled to the rhythmic chant of the paddlers, the temperature rising gradually as we neared our journey’s end – hot, lazy days shared with chattering monkeys and barking baboon and undisturbed, if not silent, nights in camp. Undisturbed, that is, with one exception when nobody could sleep for the trumpeting of elephant. Not surprising, however, when we discovered next morning that our camp was within 50 yards of their watering place.

When we needed meat, Roy hunted in the cool of the evening or near frost of dawn. I stayed at camp during these expeditions writing up my very new diary, washing my hair or mending the mosquito nets which always seemed to have just one more hole in them. Our meals were quite varied: impala, duiker, bush buck and guinea fowl – Roy was quite a good shot. Or perhaps the ceremony performed by one of the paddlers before a hunting trip had something to do with his success. Taking leaves from a nearby tree, he would venture a little way into the bush and arrange the leaves at the foot of a tree – any old tree, it seemed to me – then he would say a short prayer to the tree god, stressing the hunger of his children and asking the tree god to look kindly on the hunting party to ensure that meat returned with them. It always did!

Then there were the sun and beer stones. To prevent the sun setting before we reached camp, a stone holed through, would be placed over the twig of a tree. The beer stone, a very ordinary looking stone, placed in the fork of a tree ensured that beer would be awaiting the paddlers on their arrival at the home village.

For breakfast we usually had tiger fish or bream caught in the river as we travelled. In a gamebook I saw recently, I was interested to see tiger fish described as almost uncatchable and when caught, almost tasteless! Perhaps it was the honeymoon spirit, but I didn’t find them so.

On the sixth day we reached the Gorge, a place of swift-flowing, treacherous currents, the banks steep, bare rock rising sheer from the water. The paddlers, though used to its dangers, felt happier with it behind them. So did I! It was an oppressive and sinister stretch of the river with its whirlpools and towering rocks.

There is one particular rock, jutting up mid-river, known as the Portuguese Ivory Rock, and there the Portuguese are alleged to have stored their ivory in the old days of slave trading. If true, I feel sure that there was no poaching.

In the broad sweep of the river leaving the Gorge, we found the circus hippos; the biggest school we saw during the trip - diving, somersaulting and wallowing in the pool and generally cavorting like a troupe of seals. The paddlers being afraid of hippo, always give them a wide berth. They did on that occasion, but one hippo, bolder or perhaps more curious than his fellows, followed the barge for some way, diving and surfacing nearer each time, resenting the barge with every deep grunt. I could not help remembering that it was at this spot, I had heard, the barge had come between a hippo and her calf hidden in the reeds and, forcibly expressing her disapproval, she had taken a bite from the side of the barge. There, before my eyes, was the steel patch which had repaired the damage! Our hippo, however, eventually lost interest and returned to the pool, much to the paddlers’ relief – and mine!
We were aboard at dawn on the last day and the paddlers went with a will, a quicker rhythm to their song and a stronger pull to the paddles as the river broadened out to the sweep of the hills of Portuguese East Africa.

I caught a last glimpse of an elephant that morning; a great bull, standing alone on a jutting edge of rock overhanging the river, his massive body outlined against the scarlet sheet of the early morning sky, arrogant independence in every line. As we drifted past with the paddlers resting on their oars, he lifted that great trunk and bellowed defiance at us across the water - or perhaps he was just wishing us a good end to a wonderful journey.

At noon, we sighted our new home - Feira - the most south-westerly point of Northern Rhodesia overlooking the Zambesi where it meets the Luangwa River, flanked by Southern Rhodesia and Portuguese East Africa.

On the landing point, a crowd of chanting African gave us welcome, their song echoing across the river and re-echoing in the surrounding hills.

And so, that July, we sat and drank tea in the hotel garden at Chirundu Bridge and argued as to the exact site of our first camp on that memorable trip 10 years before.