

Zimbabwe, 2002



Length: 11.31 minutes:

<http://www.journeyman.tv/film/1336>

Synopsis

It's now illegal to even milk a cow on a white-run farm – another absurdity in a country where people may soon be starving. We follow Meryl Harrison of the Zimbabwe Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ZNSPCA). Meryl must rescue animals from farms taken over by war veterans. Cattle have been slashed, farm animals brutalised. “By the time we were called in, there were carcasses all over the place and live pigs were eating dead pigs.” She goes to Gowrie farm where farmer Terry Ford was killed in March, and whose body was famously pictured being guarded by his faithful dog, Squeak. She is tasked with freeing a thoroughbred horse and returning it to Terry's son, Mark. But while she is there, she offers to help a war veteran's dog. “We are non-political, there is no point in us being arrogant or critical. We do have to get on with the war vets. Our job is to rescue the animals, nothing more.” A war veteran even uses his tractor [the taken-over farm's tractor] to help Meryl winch out a cow wedged deep in a hole – providing some hope of unity, despite the desperate outlook.

Zimbabwe, 2002: Transcript

FOR MERYL HARRISON OF THE ZIMBABWE SPCA, EVERY DAY BRINGS A NEW CHALLENGE. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WHITE FARMERS AND WAR VETERANS TAKING OVER THEIR LAND, HAS LED TO IMMENSE SUFFERING FOR A SILENT THIRD PARTY: THE THOUSANDS OF ANIMALS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE OF VOLATILE ZIMBABWEAN POLITICS.

Meryl: “I remember watching this and thinking: SPCA must have a role to play here with these farm invasions - the animals need protecting”

IN RECENT MONTHS SHE HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY BUSY AS REPORTS OF ANIMAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT STREAM IN. IT'S MONDAY MORNING, AND TODAY IS GOING TO BE NO DIFFERENT.

A MAN HAS COME IN SEEKING HELP. ADOLF DUBE HAS NEWS OF SOMEONE'S COW WHICH IS IN GRAVE DISTRESS.

Adolf Dube: "I was praying to god to say look, help me find authentic assistance"

IT SEEMS HE HAS COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE. HALF AN HOUR LATER, MERYL AND HER TWO TRUSTY LEUTENANTS, ADDMORE CHINHEMBE AND JUSTIN SAMAKANDE, TRAVEL 40KM INTO THE RURAL AREAS OUTSIDE HARARE.

WE ARE TOLD THE COW HAS BEEN WEDGED DOWN THE BOTTOM OF THIS HOLE FOR FIVE DAYS. UNTIL NOW, NO-ONE HAS BOTHERED TO COME TO ITS AID, BECAUSE NO-ONE KNOWS WHO THE OWNER IS.

IT'S A SYMPTOM OF THE GENERAL UPHEAVAL IN ZIMBABWE'S RURAL AREAS. MANY FARMERS HAVE LEFT. A LOT OF THE FENCES HAVE BEEN CUT BY THE WAR VETERANS, AND OFTEN ANIMALS ROAM AROUND FREELY.

A LOCAL WAR VETERAN LEADER AGREES TO LET THE RESCUERS USE A TRACTOR FOR LEVERAGE. ADOLF DUBE PRAYS THAT THIS WILL WORK.

Men: "hamba hamba!!" – cow is lifted

ALTHOUGH NOT BADLY INJURED, THE ANIMAL IS TOO WEAK TO GET UP AFTER ITS 5-DAY ORDEAL. THEY WILL HAVE TO COME BACK AND CHECK ON IT LATER.

Meryl: "See you"

IN THIS CASE, IT WAS MERELY NEGLECT THAT CAUSED THIS COW TO SUFFER. BUT OFTEN, THE IMAGES MERYL IS CONFRONTED WITH ARE MUCH WORSE.

Meryl: "there's been a lot of slashed cattle - a tremendous amount. And as someone said: "If it was for food people would understand it, but what for? Just to get back at the farmer? We have had two calves bashed to death and just thrown on the compost heap - just to get back at the farmer"

BUT IT SEEMS THAT IN TIMES OF UPHEAVAL, HUMAN CRUELTY KNOWS NO BOUNDS. ANOTHER OF MERYL'S CALLS WAS TO A PIG FARM. SHE DIDN'T KNOW IT YET, BUT UNSPEAKABLE HORROR AWAITED HER.

Meryl: "It was a logistical nightmare: 800 pigs without food and water for two weeks. When I got there, there were carcasses everywhere, live pigs were eating dead pigs. I tried to pick up the dead ones but they disintegrated in my hands, I just let the live ones out. At first they agreed we could take two truckloads of pigs, then everything ground to a halt and they said we could only take the sick pigs. In the end I paid them out of my own pocket ..."

MANY ZIMBABWEAN FARMERS NO LONGER OCCUPY THEIR LAND. THE WHEELER FAMILY IS ONE SUCH EXAMPLE. SOME MONTHS AGO, THEY WERE NOTIFIED THAT THEIR FARM HAD BEEN EARMARKED FOR RESETTLEMENT. THE WHEELERS DECIDED TO FIGHT THIS BY BARRICADING THEMSELVES INTO THEIR HOUSE, BUT TO NO AVAIL. AFTER A 24-DAY STANDOFF THE SETTLERS GOT THE UPPER HAND BY SEIZING SHANNON WHEELER'S PARENTS.

Wheeler: "They had axes, stones, catapults - you name it, they had it. They were throwing stones at the house and at the roof. ...It was 7 o'clock at night, the fires were lighting - we were worried what

was happening to my parents outside, so we just took important documents and we left.”

BECAUSE OF THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, THEIR 6 LARGE DOGS WERE LEFT BEHIND ON THE OCCUPIED FARM. THE WHEELERS CAN'T GO BACK, SO MERYL AND HER TEAM ARE ASKED TO TRY AND GET THE DOGS OUT.

MERYL HAS ARRANGED THAT THE WHEELERS MEET HER AT THE TURNOFF TO THEIR FARM. IT'S A CLOSE AS THEY ARE GOING TO GET TO THEIR FORMER HOME.

Meryl: “We have to stick strictly to our job, and the minute the farmer comes with us it starts to look as if it is some kind of unit, and it's just too confrontational”

ALL THAT REMAINS NOW IS TO WAIT. NO-ONE HAS BEEN ABLE TO CHECK ON THE ANIMALS FOR A WEEK. NO-ONE KNOWS IF THEY ARE STILL ALIVE.

FINALLY, MERYL'S BLUE PICKUP IS SEEN COMING DOWN THE ROAD

ALL THE DOGS APPEAR TO BE FINE, JUST HUNGRY, AND VERY THIRSTY.

Meryl: “It makes me cry when people are reunited with their dogs”

THE FUTURE MAY BE UNCERTAIN FOR BOTH THE OWNERS AND THEIR DOGS, BUT AT LEAST THEY ARE ALL IN GOOD HEALTH. NOT ALL DOGS ARE THAT LUCKY.

Meryl: “So many of these dogs have made an impression....” (story of Nandi) not living on the farm any more.

WITH MERYL VISITING SO MANY FARMS, SOONER OR LATER THINGS CAN GET DIFFICULT.

Meryl: “There was one nasty incident - we got the animals in the truck when we were surrounded. They forced us to hand over the keys to the house. You just have to sense the mood - there is no point in being a hero. And I must add in all these farm rescues, we have never been refused a police escort.”

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER ANIMAL RESCUE. THIS TIME, ON A FARM THAT HIT THE HEADLINES EARLIER THIS YEAR.

FARMER TERRY FORD WAS SHOT IN MARCH [18 MARCH 2002] DURING A LATE NIGHT ALTERCATION WITH FARM INVADERS. THE PICTURE OF THE DOG SQUEAK GUARDING THE BODY OF HIS OWNER WAS SEEN THE WORLD OVER.

TERRY'S SON MARK HAS RECOVERED MOST OF THEIR LIVESTOCK OFF THE OCCUPIED FARM THROUGH LENGTHY NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE SETTLERS. A WEEK PREVIOUSLY HE FINALLY RETRIEVED THEIR TWO DOZEN THOROUGHBREDS. ALL WERE IN A SHOCKING CONDITION. ONE HAD TO BE PUT DOWN.

Mark Ford: “These are all saddle marks - they were using old saddles ... I can show you some worse ones.”

ONE LAST MARE CALLED STAR, A HORSE MARK HAS HAD SINCE CHILDHOOD, HAD BEEN CHASED AWAY BY THE SETTLERS AND COULD NOT BE FOUND. IT IS NOW UP TO MERYL AND HER TEAM, AS

WELL AS GILL MUNN, A VOLUNTEER HELPER, TO GO BACK TO GOWRIE FARM AND ATTEMPT TO PICK UP STAR. THEY ARE IN LUCK - STAR IS WAITING PATIENTLY UNDER A BIG TREE, AND TODAY THERE IS NO FRICTION WITH THE SETTLERS.

IN A COUNTRY THAT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY POLARISED, IT'S VITALLY IMPORTANT THAT MERYL AND HER TEAM REMAIN NEUTRAL.

Meryl: "We are non-political, there is no point in us being arrogant or critical. Our job is to rescue the animals, nothing more."

AND THAT MEANS THAT THE ANIMALS OF LAND INVADERS GET EQUAL TREATMENT WITH THOSE OF FARMERS.

AN HOUR'S DRIVE AWAY, STAR IS ABOUT TO MEET UP WITH HER RELIEVED OWNER.

Mark: "Well, I am happy to see this old horse, she was my first horse ..."

Meryl: "Ah, that's the last of the animals off, that's a good thing."

AND SHORTLY AFTERWARDS, STAR AND HER FOAL HAVE A CHANCE TO REACQUAINT THEMSELVES.

TODAY, THERE IS A HAPPY ENDING. BUT THE LONG MONTHS OF STRESSFUL WORK ARE STARTING TO TAKE THEIR TOLL.

Meryl: "Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I sit on the end of my bed and I think: I can't face one more farm. It's so depressing, especially people's houses trashed, wedding photographs on the floor, Christmas decorations crunched into the ground, kids toys"

BUT UNTIL THE ELUSIVE DREAM OF PEACE AND STABILITY RETURNS TO ZIMBABWE, INSPECTOR ADDMORE CHINHEMBE'S DIARY WILL CONTINUE TO FILL UP

Meryl: "We have two horse rescues to do this week, it's hard to say. But we are here ... until it is finished."

ENDS

*Journeyman Pictures Ltd. 4-6 High Street, Thames Ditton, Surrey, KT7 0RY, United Kingdom
Email: info@journeyman.tv