

RESCUE IN THE OMO

by Capt. Robert "Rio" Hahn, FRGS, FN'86

The Omo River Valley in southern Ethiopia is still considered by many to be one of the most remote and inhospitable places on earth. The region is inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherers, which live in a state of wild existence where one cannot assume that even relatives are also friends. The Bodi, Mursi, Surma, Karo, and Hamar tribes, thought to possibly be remnants of a very ancient layer of Hamitic peoples, are constantly at war with one another. At times one tribe will side with another against yet another, and then switch, creating a society in which all are at war with all.

The tribesmen and women display with pride stumps of severed limbs and blemishes of old wounds, which bear witness to the impetuous attacks they have survived and the fierce raids in which they have participated. The Mursi and Bodi warriors make deep horseshoe-shaped incisions on their arms, thighs and other body parts to commemorate the murder of a member of another group.

I ventured into this perilous region accompanied by my cinematographer, Zeljko Malnar, and two interpreter guides supplied by the government of Ethiopia. Intent on including the tribes of this hazardous region in our cultural film series, we descended into the thick of it and made camp along the banks of the Omo. Malnar, a handsome, towering Montenegrin Prince, prided himself on possessing the ability to charm all genders of any people.

Displaying his usual headstrong nature, Malnar one day ventured off filming on his own, accompanied by only a couple of our rifle slinging guards. As evening approached, he hadn't returned so I set about organizing a search party. Gathering as many armed men as I could, we traveled in the same direction he had taken. Eventually we caught up with him and his guards, who were now unarmed hostages immersed in a tribal war. Negotiations proceeded. At one point, justifiably angered by Malnar's naively arrogant behavior, I nearly accepted our Arriflex film camera in exchange for leaving him and the other guards. However, persuaded by my own men, who were anxious to free their comrades and fortunately outnumbered in both men and rifles the opposing group, we eventually recovered our guards, Malnar, and the camera.

Retelling this story months later in Yugoslavia, I was roundly chided by Malnar's friends for having passed up the opportunity of accepting the camera and leaving Malnar to a true test of his hitherto inescapable charm!

(Winner of The Explorers Club Newsletter story competition.)