

Selected history of Rhodesian conflict 1970-1980



A paper based on a presentation to the Institute in Sydney on 28 January 2025 by

Fabian Cohnen

Former Rhodesian Regular Army Infantry officer; member Royal United Services for Security and Defence Studies (New South Wales)

Britain's colonisation of Rhodesia since 1890 subsequently got intertwined in the Black-White population dynamics, especially tribal politics among the many tribes that existed in Africa. Post Second World War and with the de-colonisation of most of the colonies in the African continent, new nations Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana and South Africa engulfed Rhodesia. Black aspiration to be self-governing and demand meaningful power sharing were real, and inevitable in the long term. Russian forays into Africa to counter the 'Empire' added to the quagmire. In the decade 1970-1980 the resultant dynamics erupted into a conflict in Rhodesia that involved Guerrilla warfare between the Rhodesian Armed Forces and the Guerrilla force.

Key words: Rhodesia; Zimbabwe; South Africa; Zambia, Mozambique; Botswana; Guerrilla operations; White population; Black population; tribe.

Introduction

Rhodesia, what is now Zimbabwe, is a landlocked country in Southern Africa. It is bordered by Zambia in the North, Mozambique in the East, South Africa in the South and Botswana in the West. A notable feature in the north of Rhodesia is Lake Kariba, being the world's largest man-made lake covering approximately 250,000 sq.km., to provide hydroelectric power (and endless recreation opportunities) to both Zambia and Rhodesia.

During the period 1972-1980 the Rhodesian population was approximately 260,000 Whites and 6.3 million African. The White population equates roughly to that of the Sutherland Shire in Sydney today. Its landmass is 390,800 sq.km. compared to 810,000 sq.km. New South Wales. Economically US\$ GDP per capita (1977) in Rhodesia was \$650, Australia was \$7778, therefore clearly income disparity within the population of Rhodesia was enormous.

Generally, 'First World' standards of living was enjoyed by the White community, with the Africans providing paid labour in homes, retail, farms, mines and factories. Those Africans not employed in towns practised subsistence farming in legislated protected areas called Tribal Trust Lands, which continue today to be the ancestral home of the tribes. Its worth being clear that chronic income inequality is endemic across most African countries but based on tribal lines and nepotism rather than a Black/White divide, and by no means unusual. For its time Rhodesia was viewed as a successful nation by African standards, with comparative high levels of education and health for all, and relatively harmonious race relations.

History

The White history of Rhodesia began formally by the arrival of the Pioneer Column with the establishment of Salisbury town in the north-east as the capital in 1890. The arrival of Whites upset the long-established native power imbalance within Rhodesia. An offshoot of the Zulu tribe from South Africa had settled around Bulawayo in the south-west and became known as the Matabele. They were culturally a raiding/warrior society that plundered, raped and pillaged the rest of the country at will. The receiving end of these incursions were the majority Shona tribe, a more peaceful farming orientated society without a strong warrior tradition. The arrival of the Whites put a partial halt on the Matabele incursions much to the delight of the Shona, resulting in the Whites eventually dominating the Matabele and additionally suppressing a Shona rebellion, resulting in the Whites taking control of the country.

Funding for the establishment of the colony was provided by mining magnates who made their fortunes in South African gold and diamonds. This surplus cash married up with the British colonial expansion in Africa rather cheaply. The billionaire investor Cecil Rhodes¹ (and his backers) took almost the entire investment risk and were granted in return 380,000 sq.km. territory and named it Rhodesia, much to the astonishment of the Africans living there and one might think with some admiration. The British Government played

¹After whom the name Rhodesia was adopted for the country.

along with its wholehearted support with what was to become elusive wealth for all from mineral wealth yet to be discovered.

By 1923 Rhodesia was granted self-governing colonial status (1855 for the colony of New South Wales). White immigration continued to increase significantly after the First World War (to which Rhodesia contributed infantry to battles on Western Front, Salonika and East Africa). Frequent newspaper adverts across Britain encouraged adventurous fit young men and women to become settlers, and in return provided with land grants to farm. With an ideal climate, an abundance of labourers and servants to be had, farming was lucrative thus they came!

The Second World War saw Rhodesian pilots flying over Europe (Royal Air Force Air Marshal "Bomber" Arthur Harris was a Rhodesian), Infantry was fighting in Burma, and during the Malayan emergency again saw Infantry/SAS (Special Air Service) from Rhodesia involved. This sense of Empire and the "Mother" country looking out for Rhodesians and Rhodesia became a comfortable myth of safety and security for the tiny White population.

By 1960, things degenerated. Britain could no longer support its Empire, and in Africa Harold Macmillan was preaching the "Winds of Change", or more realistically "We have run out of money and doing a runner". A very hurried and unorganised series of African independent States emerged from the British colonies. An equally surprised Black educated minority with little or no experience in governing were given the reins - chaos ensued in most cases. The stories of civil unrest and poor governance in this period are well documented, but there was no going back.

Rhodesia was a relatively wealthy and productive society and determined to ignore instructions from the British Government. In 1965, under Ian Smith as Prime Minister, a former Spitfire pilot and leader of the minority White government declared a "Unilateral Declaration of Independence" (UDI) from Britain. This can only be described as a giant unanticipated calamity to the British Government, enabled with the tacit support from the South African government, Africa's superpower. South Africa was motivated to support this to avoid chaos on its borders and felt very connected to the large and vocal White Afrikaans population within Rhodesia who had very strong ties to their South African 'cousins'.

This caused consternation in its time. The British along with its allies declared sanctions against Rhodesia, a vulnerable landlocked country, and even contemplated invasion, but decided a White-on-White war in Southern Africa would be counterproductive.

It was obvious to Ian Smith and the minority White community that Black aspiration to be self-governing and demand meaningful power sharing were real, and

in the long term inevitable. The thorny issue was how to go about it in an orderly way so as not to destroy the governance and economy of what in its time was described as the "Jewel of Africa".

The political machinations to achieve this is a complex story, although it should be emphasised that real efforts were made to capture the minds and hearts of moderate Black political leaders from the outset, but the rapid radicalisation of Black politics in the context of the Cold War could not be stopped. Where could an impatient educated Black radical in Rhodesia get financial, military and political support without sitting in meetings for who knows how many years negotiating with a Smith minority white government? China and Russia were falling over themselves in this period to rid Africa of western colonialism. Africa (then and now) promised long term influence of impoverished emerging governments, the capture of mineral and agricultural wealth and development opportunities. Cheap wars of liberation against white domination compared very favourably (and got great press) to engaging with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or America directly. Politically the Communist nations had all of the relevant rhetoric and propaganda that resonated perfectly to harassed, exiled, radical Black leaders; 'throw off your racist oppressors', 'kill your landlords', 'capitalists are pigs' were all well-worn slogans coupled with the will to donate generously and provide the means to fight a war. The implied payback of future economic enslavement was tolerated as a necessary evil by the African radicals - where else to turn?

By 1966 armed incursions funded by Russia started to filter into Rhodesia from a newly independent Zambia. In addition, two Black leaders, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo began to emerge among the exiled radicals that would jointly fight the Guerrilla war.

Mugabe became the leader of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA). This was the most populous movement and had at its core support from the majority Shona tribe. Mugabe had the enthusiastic backing of the Chinese. Mozambique (bordering to the east of Rhodesia) was a Portuguese colony, and the Africans there fought their own Guerrilla war against the Portuguese colonisers. The Portuguese declared defeat and granted independence in 1975. Mugabe quickly entrenched his main military and political base of operations there, much to the consternation of the Rhodesian government that was exporting unto 60% of its trade through Mozambique ports and was now faced with a second front.

Nkomo was the leader of Zimbabwe People Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). His support base was the minority Matabele tribe centred around Bulawayo who had formally dominated the other African tribes of

Rhodesia before the arrival of the Pioneer Column. He selected the Russians as his backers and chose his main base of military operations in a newly independent Zambia (1964).

Military aspects

By 1972 incursions from Zambia by ZIPRA using the wilderness of the Zambezi River Valley and Lake Kariba to infiltrate was becoming an increasing problem. ZIPRA was increasingly being supported by incursions from its struggle ally ZANLA in the equally wild and remote North East where Zambia and Mozambique shared borders. When Mozambique was granted its independence Rhodesia was faced with a protracted insurgency across nearly the entirety of its northern and eastern borders.

At its core, the military problem was how to find and destroy the adversary and thereby maintain the confidence of the internal political negotiation process. Guerrillas operated in small groups of 5-20 in the vast sparsely populated African bush. Rhodesia had a force of ~10,000 Regulars and an ageing Air Force to counter this.

The security forces on hand to engage with an estimated 20-30,000 Guerrillas were:

Army (organised into 4 Brigades)

- Regular Army (~10,800):
 - Rhodesian Light Infantry 1 x Battalion (Bn) - White only.
 - SAS 1 x C Squadron – White only.
 - Selous Scouts – Mixed Race + turned Guerrillas.
 - Rhodesian African Rifles 3 x Bn+ and Independent Companies – White officers/Black NCO's/Other Ranks's (OR).
 - Grey Scouts 4 x Squadrons – Mounted Infantry – White.
 - Armoured Cars 5 x Squadrons – Mixed Race.
 - Guard Force/Static – Mixed Race.
- Territorial Units (Call Up Units) (~7-8000):
 - 8 x Bn Rhodesia Regiment/Independent Companies – Mixed Race.

Police

- All up ~8000 with 19,000 Reservists:
 - Police (British South Africa Police) – Mixed.
 - Police Anti-Terrorist Unit (PATU) – Mixed.
 - Special Branch – Mixed.

Air Force

- No. 1 Squadron – Thornhill (12 x Hawker Hunter).
- No. 2 Squadron – Thornhill (29 x Vampire).
- No. 3 Squadron – New Sarum (13 x Douglas C-47).
- No. 4 Squadron – Thornhill (11 x Trojan; 21 x Reims-Cessna - Lynx).
- No. 5 Squadron – New Sarum (10 x Canberra).

- No. 6 Squadron – Thornhill (13 x Percival Provost).
- No. 7 Squadron – New Sarum (40 x Alouette).
- No. 8 Squadron – New Sarum (11 x Huey).

It must be emphasised that an estimated 70% of the Rhodesian security forces were Black volunteers who fought to the end with their White comrades. Africans were not subject to universal conscription. Motivation to volunteer was driven by security, pay, food and family linkages, particularly in the Rhodesian African Rifles. Volunteers could often trace back several generations of service and were seen as part of a large Army family with strong regimental traditions.

Tactics to solve the military problem

The core military problem was solved in three (main) ways. These were formulated in addition to normal military activities which are too numerous to mention.

The Fireforce

This methodology to engage the enemy was almost exclusively practiced and perfected by the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI). Later in the war it was employed by various units including the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR). It required highly experienced, aggressive and disciplined troops.

In brief, a clandestine observation team would remain isolated on a high feature for several days observing villages and general movement in the area. Should the team spot Guerrillas or strong evidence of a group, they would request Fireforce to engage the adversary.

Most operational areas were covered by a Fireforce base which would typically comprise four Alouette helicopters, comprising a “K Car”, this being the commanders helicopter equipped with a 20mm cannon for fire support. Three “G Cars” would ferry the infantry, four per helicopter armed with twin browning machine guns. On call would be Air Force Lynx's and heavier Vampire Bombers should they be needed. Should troops be in the area they would be instructed to set up Stop Groups to engage fleeing Guerrillas in more obvious nearby locations. The Fireforce once underway required a logistic tail and resupply trucks would be sent to refuel the helicopters and resupply ammunition and water close to the destination.

As the helicopter fleet neared the location, the “K Car” would be in touch with the observation team and any troops already on the ground to determine the movement and characteristics of the enemy, and the “K Car” commander, usually a Major, would direct his resources like a conductor with his orchestra. The skill and experience to manage this are immense as were the challenges. The adversary would usually “bomb” (scatter) into cover at the noise of approaching

helicopters, and could move extraordinarily quickly.

The RLI would move in aggressive skirmish lines with many challenges, among which were an adversary firing back and fleeing haphazardly to cover in a thick bush and rocky terrain, incoming supporting cannon/machine gun fire and possible more powerful air force intervention with cluster bombs and napalm, and off course numerous instructions from the K Car as the adversary movement ebbed and flowed. Grass fires were a constant menace as tracer, cannon rounds and white phosphorus grenades were used to subdue the adversary. It was not unusual for troops to be redeployed in another helicopter manoeuvre or for helicopters to do dummy troop drops to confuse the adversary. Later in the war as the adversary's forces increased to groups of 50-100, Fireforce began to deploy with greater number of helicopters (including Pumas from South Africa capable of carrying 20 troops) and parachutists. Dakotas were used (c1943), dropping groups of 18 in a 'jump' to instantly increase forces on the ground.

Towards the end of the war it was not unusual for a Fireforce team to have 3-4 call outs per day, clearly this was not sustainable. The stress on troop morale and wear and tear on equipment was beginning to tell by 1979-80. Nevertheless, this proved to be the mainstay of effective counter insurgency throughout the war.

Cross border operations

Small scale cross border operations conducted by the SAS were the norm. Its very intent was to undertake disruptive operations like laying mines, ambushes, gathering intelligence and blowing up infrastructure like rail and assets to keep the adversary confused, disrupted and frightened.

By 1976 it became apparent that internal guerrilla activity was increasing materially and a necessary focus should be on eliminating the training camps in neighbouring safe haven countries of Zambia and Mozambique. South Africa at the time was pressuring Rhodesia to speed up an internal peaceful political settlement with Black moderates and not to escalate a wider regional conflict.

The targets were too tempting for the Rhodesian military struggling to contain the internal conflict. The camps were characterised by being close to the Rhodesian border, lightly defended, and populated with large numbers of half trained, inexperienced Guerrillas.

The first attack was Operation Eland in 1976. A column of vehicles of Black and White Rhodesian troops disguised as Mozambique government military arrived at the Nyadzonya camp (in Mozambique). They bluffed their way through security at the time of morning muster and opened fire on dense ranks of troops, killing approximately 1000 and wounding many

more, with no friendly casualties. South Africa was apoplectic; however, the success of this raid was the start of an inevitable trend.

Operation Dingo in 1977 targeted a large camp of 8-10,000 comprising the ZANLA HQ of Chimoio and a smaller camp at Tembue. It was a combined all arms attack of infantry in a Fireforce role and the Airforce utilising most of the Hawkers Hunter and Canberra bombers available. For the loss of two killed, eight wounded and one Vampire Bomber lost, some 3000 enemy were killed and 4000 wounded.

By 1979 the camps had learnt their lessons on defence. Operation Miracle sought to engage an entrenched enemy over 64 sq.km. supported by anti-aircraft fire. Rhodesian troops took on a battle that was akin to classical trench warfare, using artillery and bombers to support infantry. Little headway was made to capture the elaborate trench system against a determined adversary. Losses were an irreplaceable Canberra Bomber, a Hawker Hunter, and two helicopters to anti-aircraft fire with eight infantry killed, the Rhodesian army withdrew in a stalemate.

The days of the successful large scale cross border attacks were now over, and within seven months the war was finished.

The Selous Scouts

The Selous Scouts founded in 1973 was tasked mainly with finding and eliminating Guerrilla groups operating inside Rhodesia. This unit's selection criteria could be compared to the SAS, and was based on bush survival skills, operating in small groups, tracking and endurance. It was a mixed-race unit that also included turned Guerrillas. The White element often changed their appearance as Black in operations and many could speak African dialects and had some success if complimented by Black troops. Of necessity, the Unit had a very high esprit-de-corps and had unique and independent operational tactics and direction.

Typically, an operational area where Guerrillas were operating and the groups were deemed to be of strategic interest would be designated as "Frozen". Most security forces would be withdrawn, and up to that area would be deployed the Selous Scouts to seek out the enemy, living off the land, dressed and armed as Guerrillas, and engage the enemy on their own terms through subterfuge. Operations had a wide latitude of decision-making and this rather murky, non-conventional flexible agenda meant most operations were secret and methods kept off the public arena and main-stream military.

Guerrilla tactics

Guerrilla tactics can be described as following Mao's '*On Guerrilla Warfare*' 1937. Direct military confrontation was largely avoided and the aim was to

influence the hearts and minds of the rural majority and to build strength gradually through military and psychological attrition of a stronger adversary.

This was achieved with both political indoctrination and the use of utter brutality. Anyone not on board with the message was beaten up or murdered, and this included many of the traditional leaders, security forces personnel on leave, and civil and law officers administering rural Rhodesia.

Examples of incidents perpetuated by ZIPRA and ZANLA were:

- Woolworths supermarket bombing in Salisbury, 1977 – 11 dead 76 injured;
- Two civilian Air Rhodesia Viscounts shot down 1978 – 115 tourists dead, 18 were murdered on the ground after surviving the crashes;
- Elim Mission massacre 1978 – Pentecostal missionaries – eight adults, four children and a baby murdered;
- Salisbury airport fuel tanks blown up by RPG (Rocket Propellant Gun) fire in 1978 - South Africa had to fly in fire fighting units as none were available in Rhodesia to extinguish the fire;
- White farm murders – over the war years 234 Farmers, wives and children were murdered;
- Headman/ 'Sell Out' murders – attempts to destroy local governance – estimated at several thousand.

Decline of morale

By 1978-79 a number of factors began to materially wear down the White population's morale and will to continue.

Factors were many, and included:

- Militarily the impact of continuous disruptive call-ups on a small White population was unsustainable. It became normal for adult White Rhodesian male to be six weeks in the Army and six weeks in his job in a continuous rotation;
- Emigration was reaching an all-time high, the White population was down from a peak of ~260,000 to ~180,000, deferments from National Service to study abroad became increasingly common;
- The drain on the economy of the war was enormous; some 40% of government expenditure was being spent on the security forces and there was a general and increasing reluctance of South Africa to prop up what looked like to be an unwinnable war;
- Sanctions were always against Rhodesia and sanctions busting became an art form, however, military equipment was increasingly difficult to source and there was intermittent rationing and shortages of most consumer staples;
- Black moderate leaders that offered hope for a political settlement were not supported by most

rural Africans, the radicals led by Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe had the moral and political high ground and the military muscle to make sure the population supported them.

Outcome

The direct military consequences of the war were the casualties; the numbers I quoted are close approximations. The Guerrilla forces suffered approximately 17,000 deaths, the security forces 2500 (roughly equal Black and White). The enduring tragedy of the conflict were the civilians caught up in what was euphemistically called 'Cross Fire'. The Guerrillas would embed themselves in and around villages. Invariably when contact was made with the security forces, it was mostly impossible to differentiate in a fire fight who was who, and it can be estimated at least 10,000 civilians were killed in this way.

Another casualty is the country of Zimbabwe. Majority rule went from euphoria to the realisation that tribalism, graft, theft and appropriation by elites and has left the country impoverished. A consequence of this is Black (and White) Zimbabweans are emigrating to escape poverty and oppression, and sadly these tend to be the better educated and successful who ideally should have remained to build their country. I can say this conclusively, we have all won the lottery of life to live in Australia, and may we learn despite its failings to protect and cherish its institutions, way of life, and unique culture.

The Author²

Fabian Cohnen was born in Rhodesia and was called up for National Service in 1979 like most other school leavers. He underwent basic infantry training in Bulawayo and transferred to the Rhodesian Light Infantry Training Troop in Salisbury, following which he went to officer selection in Gwelo. Fabian graduated in the last Regular Rhodesian Infantry Officers Course in 1980 and was posted as 2nd Lieutenant to the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR). The Bush War was in transition at that point and the retraining and amalgamation of the Rhodesian and guerrilla forces was starting under regular army supervision with light assistance from the British Army. Before leaving Zimbabwe for South Africa in 1981, Fabian was Officer Commanding C Company 3 RAR as a Lieutenant. 3 RAR was then rebadged as 33 Infantry Battalion under the Zimbabwe National Army. Growing up in Rhodesia, being surrounded and having personal experience of the bush war and becoming part of the military left Fabian with a lifelong interest in military history. Fabian is a member of the Military History Society of New South Wales.

²Provided by the author.