

Fighting for Time

A Review of: “Rhodesia’s Military and Zimbabwe’s Independence” by Charles D. Melson¹²

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Major (ret.) of the USMC, military historian and veteran of the Vietnam war, Charles David Melson’s book elaborates in great detail the surviving and available information on the conflict in Rhodesia (today’s Zimbabwe) throughout its 8 chapters with the goal of studying low-intensity warfare in Rhodesia and the British Commonwealth experience of the past decades for use today.

The first chapter tells a summary of (South) Rhodesia’s history and institutional structure for context in which the main subject of the book takes place. It explains its geographical and demographic features. The country is divided into strips of land with favourable living conditions and land unsuitable for habitation or agriculture. Population-wise, black African natives made up the majority of the country’s demographics, more so in the rural parts of the country, while white European settlers inhabited mostly the urban areas, still being in the minority, albeit to a much lesser extent.

The chapter also details extensively the Rhodesian doctrine, experiences gained from conflicts from the 1950’s to the 1970’s in foreign conflicts within the Commonwealth as well as police, military, and intelligence institutions. Military and air services were subordinated to the police force within a joint organisation of the British South Africa Police of Rhodesia (BSAP) – which was neither British nor South African, only in name, and which heavily relied on African natives and not just the settler Europeans, especially prior to the conflict. This meant different goals for the two major parts of the organisation, to uphold law and order internally for the police, and to defend the country against external threats for the military. This resulted in institutional friction, reducing the effectiveness of the otherwise successful force past the initial phase of the insurgency, even in the face of changes made to the institutional structure during the war. Throughout the conflict, the Rhodesian side viewed its actions as upholding the law of the land against insurgents and terrorists – the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army and the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army – and saw an evolution from

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law and order to emergency powers to finally martial law to try to tackle the threat.

Chapter two explains how general-purpose and special forces as well as the separate intelligence branches operated, how they were structured, what tasks they were given both in Rhodesia and abroad, what they comprised. South Africa, Portugal, and other Commonwealth countries also helped in operations conducted by the undermanned Rhodesian forces. Thanks to experience and skills gained from domestic and foreign deployments, the Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS) was a prominent actor, among others, and partook in various reconnaissance, intelligence, infiltration, sabotage, and other types of missions in the conflict. As the chapter emphasises, one chief example of the skills gained was tracking, a quintessential expertise to have in the non-urban Rhodesian environment, which led to the establishment of dedicated tracking units and training independent of the SAS, and helicopters and light aircraft being deployed to aid the trackers.

In chapter three, Melson stresses the importance of air support that the Rhodesian ground forces possessed that gave them a decisive edge over the insurgents. He explains the structure, organisation, and operation of the Rhodesian Air Force, the smallest branch of the military yet the most prestigious and perhaps the best equipped one, and that it played four main roles: deterrence, air defence, tactical support as well as providing aid to the civil power. Deterrence served to protect the country from unlikely but still possible foreign aerial aggression; while tactical support became a vital part of anti-terrorist operations, providing help to both the military and the police force. The conflict in Rhodesia was not limited to its borders as the terrorists launched their incursions from insurgent bases located across the border in neighbouring Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), Angola, Botswana, and Mozambique. The author also presents the vintage, yet reliable equipment used by the well-trained pilots that Rhodesia managed to procure and maintain despite a struggling economy and international sanctions levied against it. The air force proved to be the biggest threat to and a great way to demoralise the guerrillas, to which they had to invent countermeasures such as camouflage and drills. Insurgent anti-aircraft measures included machinegun fire with tracers, heat-seeking missile systems (mostly abroad), as well as ambushes against the grounded rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft.

In the fourth chapter, the author continues the presentation of the air force, this time explaining its adaptation from internal security to counterinsurgency measures, in close cooperation with other branches of the military and the police force. Melson further elaborates on the organisation and use of the Rhodesian Air Force and explains its doctrine of a three-way focus. These are: transportation, reconnaissance, and offence. Transportation – the most common and useful form of air support during the conflict – included moving or evacuating troops and materiel to the operational areas, tactical deployment, rapid reinforcements, and resupply, among others. Reconnaissance was made up of two methods: photographic and visual air observation. Other uses comprised communication, command, and control – i.e. to coordinate with the army and police force, to relay friendly and to intercept enemy communications, and to assume operational command when needed – as

well as psychological and propaganda operations, liaison and civilian transport flights, protecting road convoys, etc. Finally, the offensive role included direct strikes and close air support with various dropped explosive and incendiary ordnances, rockets, and cannons.

The fifth chapter highlights the changes in joint counterinsurgency operations, a shift from border to area control, and the formations including the SAS to the Selous Scouts and Grey's Scouts. The author explains their selection process, training, equipment, and operation on the field. The Selous Scouts were based on the SAS and were a unique formation due to its mixed racial recruitment and merit- and performance-based recognition, as opposed to the exclusively European SAS, giving it the ability to approach and infiltrate the terrorist groups in tribal areas convincingly and effectively to locate their bases and direct conventional forces to them. Grey's Scouts on the other hand were an experimental mounted infantry unit created for long-range land reconnaissance, patrolling rural areas, tracking and following, support roles, etc. Apart from these three, several other "minor" units are detailed.

As the war progressed, so grew the number of insurgents and deployments. In chapter six, Melson presents in great detail the organisation and operation of Fire Forces and presents several first-hand accounts of their missions. For example, the Selous Scouts, doing reconnaissance work from secret observation posts surveilling African tribal areas, would dispatch Fire Forces, who would then be moved to the area by the air force. They would then deploy, do their thing with the support of aircraft, and extract. As the author points out, the longer the planning, the better the results were. To counter Fire Force, the guerrillas adopted several techniques like sentries listening for incoming aircraft, and young boys (*mujibas*) to serve as sentries, messengers, and spies to scout out observation posts.

Chapter seven deals with external, cross-border operations in the bordering countries of Zambia, Botswana, and Mozambique, known as the Frontline States, that helped the insurgents by providing basing, support, and access to Rhodesia. These external efforts were aided by South African and Portuguese units. Numbering more than 500 operations over the almost two decades of the conflict, these cross-border raids were covert or clandestine in nature, either against a specific target or an area, but also included non-military related activities such as intelligence gathering and sanctions-busting. The author expands on several of these operations in detail.

The eighth and last chapter delves into the unconventional side of the warfare with the use of auxiliary forces to pacify low-priority regions, the use of the resistance movement in Mozambique, and the so-called "dirty tricks" that included extremely sensitive special operations like ambushes, target captures or eliminations, disinformation efforts, and others, often of dubious legal or moral nature.

Melson concludes that the conflict from the Rhodesian side can be described as a tactical victory but strategic defeat. The Rhodesian military and special forces became so battle-hardened that they could not be defeated by the guerrillas in combat, but neither could the growing camp of the insurgents as a whole, who would eventually see victory in the elections



and the transformation of Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. A big role in the Security Forces' success was played by the air force both as weapons and morale boosters as well as the special operations. Despite these killing machines, it was the neglect of a civic approach that ultimately lost them the war: the classic dilemma of counterinsurgency.

Completing the book are an extensive list of appendices and other supplementary resources at the end in addition to a large number of maps and different kinds of figures as well as countless first-hand accounts of those involved on both sides found throughout the chapters to complement and help illustrate the contents of the book.

However, what is somewhat missing from the book is the elaboration on the Communist Bloc's involvement, including that of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. The book does make a brief mention or two of the fact, but further information would have been appreciated on, for instance, how giving the Republic of China's UN Security Council seat to Communist China influenced the Rhodesian situation, or how members of ZAPU and ZANU were supported, trained, and equipped by the Soviet Union and China respectively.⁴

Nevertheless, it is an excellent piece of military history, and I recommend it to anyone studying or interested in modern Africa and/or military history, especially counterinsurgency.

⁴ Lake, Anthony: *The 'Tar Baby' Option: American Policy Toward Southern Rhodesia*. New York: Columbia University Press, June 1976. http://psimg.jstor.org/fsi/img/pdf/t0/10.5555/al.sff.document.crp2b20030_final.pdf