

Who Dares Loses?

Assessing Rhodesia's Counter-Insurgency Experience

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Pound for pound, the Rhodesian¹ security forces may have been the most effective fighting force of the last century. Numbering at their peak 15,000 troops,² pitted against an opposition likely at least three times as strong within and without the country by the war's end,³ and employing increasingly aggressive tactics taking them into the neighbouring countries, they were able to keep in check their numerically superior guerrilla opponents, despite having to operate across a country larger than Germany, and over terrain practically impassable in many locations. But still, the war was lost with the advent to power of Robert Mugabe's regime in 1980 – or was it? This article revisits the Rhodesian strategy, assesses what mistakes were made and the conduct of the war, and identifies lessons for contemporary counter-insurgency campaigns.

A Brief History

Much has been written about the Rhodesian 'bush war' – otherwise known as the Second Chimurenga⁴ (liberation struggle) – lasting from 1964 to 1979. Many of these writings are popularized accounts of the war, focusing, in the main, on the catalogue⁵ of fighting experiences. In so doing they, at worst, risk mythologizing the war's conduct. At best, they risk removing the bush war from the political context of the time.⁶

The Rhodesian bush war involved atrocities and dirty tricks on both sides. The weight of international public opinion over these actions has, by and large, condemned the Rhodesians on account of the political system they were fighting to uphold: one committed to a disproportionate role for the white

minority (numbering at its peak probably 300,000) over the black majority (then some six million). That much is undeniable in a war which cost the lives of an estimated 25,000 civilians,⁷ 954 Rhodesian security force personnel, and over 8,000 guerrillas.⁸ It should also be noted, however, that history is less and less kind to the actions of the Zimbabwean liberators, realizing in the twenty-first century the ruthlessness with which they have been willing to conduct their politics, not just against hated colonial racists, but their own people.

The war progressed through four stages. The first phase can be delineated from the time of the start of civil disobedience campaigns in 1957 through the creation of the two dominant African political movements in the early 1960s: Joshua Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) – and its armed wing, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA); and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) – and its Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA).⁹

A second stage can be identified with the intensification of the conflict with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by Ian Smith's government on 11 November 1965, and the subsequent imposition of international sanctions. The start of this phase of the war – now commemorated in Zimbabwe as Chimurenga Day – occurred on 28 April 1966 between Rhodesian security forces and seven ZANLA insurgents near Sinoia. During 1967 and 1968, groups totaling more than 300 insurgents crossed into Rhodesia from Zambia. They included

members of the military wing¹⁰ of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), encouraging Pretoria to commit police forces in support of the Rhodesians. The act of UDI sparked the insurgency by granting the black national movements the cause and timing to do so; and in so doing it undermined the fundamentally political basis of the counter-insurgency by both delegitimizing the Rhodesian government and making much more difficult the search for a credible, moderate black government partner.

At the same time, the Rhodesians battled to deal with the effects of an international arms and oil embargo, met partly through South African-supplied fuel and weapons along with a dose of local engineering ingenuity, especially in the development of mine-protection vehicles. The launching of successful Rhodesian security force operations against the guerrilla incursions, such as *Nickel*, *Cauldron* and *Griffin* in the late 1960s, represented a shift away from police control of the counter-insurgency through the British South Africa Police (BSAP), a continuous source of army-police friction among leadership until 1980.

The Rhodesian bush war involved atrocities and dirty tricks on both sides

A further significant escalation – a third phase – in the war occurred around the time of the fall of the Portuguese colonial regime in Mozambique. Even before the formal transfer of power in Mozambique on 25 June 1975, the conflict had ratcheted up with guerrillas operating from bases in Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia and from those areas controlled by the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) in the neighbouring Portuguese colony. FRELIMO had already become convinced of the necessity to 'liberate' Rhodesia.¹¹ By this time, major operations (such as Operation Hurricane in the north-east) were underway and the shepherding of the African population into Protected Villages (PVs) started, as was the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire*

minefield along the border. Many of these concepts were borrowed from successful British-led operations in Kenya and Malaya. The Rhodesians hoped that by using similar tactics they would win the war. But there was a big political difference. The British had fought to enable the peaceful transfer to and consolidation of indigenous power; the Rhodesians aimed to maintain the white status quo.

Yet white casualties remained low and most of the white Rhodesian public (save those in the farming community) were largely blissfully unaware of the deterioration in the security situation. Already in 1972, Prime Minister Ian Smith had stated on the radio, that the security situation was 'far more serious than it appears on the surface, and if the man in the street could have access to the security information which I and my colleagues in government have, then I think he would be a lot more worried than he is today.'¹² As fighting intensified and responsibility for dealing with the insurgency moved from the police to the military, this stage saw the increasing professionalism of the armed forces. For example, the Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS) had shrunk from 150 to just thirty men by 1975 in an effort to get away from the ethos and image of the 'Special African Safaris' that it had become. But this set the stage for a large-scale expansion and increasing professionalism. By the war's end the SAS had expanded to 270 'badged' (divided equally between regulars, national servicemen, and reservists) and 200 'unbadged' personnel (clerks, cooks, drivers, guards, etc.).

With the guerrillas massing over the borders in ever-increasing numbers and using a mix of terror and political inducements to 'win' the support of local civilians, the Rhodesians countered by, first, announcing in April 1977 a 'hearts and minds' campaign, increasingly employing 'Fireforce' quick-reaction interdiction teams, and, most tellingly, conducting large-scale raids into Mozambique and Zambia. In May 1977, the Rhodesian Commander of Combined Operations, Lieutenant General Peter Walls, informed the public that the Rhodesian forces were changing tactics

from 'contain and hold' to hot pursuit 'search and destroy' operations 'when necessary'. In November 1977, around 200 Rhodesian troops¹³ crossed the border in the biggest 'pre-emptive' cross-border raid yet. With air bombardment provided by the Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF), the Rhodesians attacked the 4,000-strong ZANLA base at Chimoio in Mozambique.¹⁴

Such raids were replicated with increasing frequency, including the attack on Joshua Nkomo's home in Lusaka, Zambia in April 1979 (Operation Bastille), along with regular joint-force bomber air raids on encampments and assembly areas in Mozambique and Zambia (with logistical and reconnaissance support often provided by South Africa). For example, the joint-force action on the ZIPRA camps in Zambia in October 1978 accounted for upwards of two thousand ZIPRA casualties. In addition, there were ongoing clandestine attacks on regional infrastructure by Rhodesian Selous Scouts¹⁵ and SAS forces. Most notably, employing the wave of dissatisfaction over the performance of the self-avowedly Marxist-Leninist FRELIMO government in Mozambique, and utilizing both covert and overt support, during this time the Rhodesian government also assisted in forming, arming and replenishing the Mozambique National Resistance Movement (RENAMO). The development of such proxy forces reached its zenith as apartheid South Africa invigorated RENAMO after the creation of Zimbabwe in 1980, replicating the model of its relationship with Jonas Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) movement in Angola. Similarly, the pre-emptive cross-border attacks became a feature, too, of South African Defence Force (SADF) actions in the 1980s into Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Lesotho, Angola and Mozambique. These were sometimes aimed (as the Rhodesians had done) at guerrilla bases, on other occasions at regional infrastructure. A notable difference between the Rhodesians and South Africans, however, was in admissibility: the South African politicians mostly denied extra-territorial

operations; white Rhodesians were largely allied around what was openly acknowledged as an internal and external enemy.

This third phase lasted from 1975 until March 1978, the date of the internal settlement between Ian Smith's government and the moderate United African National Council (UANC) led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa,¹⁷ leading to the (temporary) creation of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia in June 1979 following elections in April that year. The internal settlement followed the failed South African-brokered effort with the Zambians in August 1975 and the later Anglo-American peace initiative which culminated in the ill-fated Geneva conference in 1977. During this new phase, the South Africans, on whom the Rhodesian security forces had relied a great deal not only for oil and funding¹⁸ but also for support troops (mainly police) and helicopters, largely pulled out in order to give more weight and credibility to the political process. In the field, this translated into increasing numbers of foreign recruits, notably Vietnam veterans from Australia, New Zealand and the United States, but also others from Canada, Portugal, and especially the United Kingdom.

This phase ended with the failure of the government to capitalize politically on the relative success of the security forces with the inability of the

Zimbabwe-Rhodesia administration of Bishop Muzorewa to secure international recognition, notably from the Carter administration in the US following the Bishop's visit there in July 1979. More importantly, both Mugabe and Nkomo rejected the arrangement, and the war continued unabated.

The fourth and final stage, from 1978 until the end of the war, saw increasing regional and international pressure on the parties to settle. The Rhodesians, although continuing to militarily perform well in the field, were weak politically at home and outside. These constraints were exacerbated by the disproportionately large effect of white casualties on its small population, who increasingly viewed themselves to be under siege. Moreover, the economy was faltering, weakened by large-scale white emigration¹⁹ and tightening sanctions. The South African government was putting increasing pressure on the Muzorewa-Smith government to negotiate an end to the crisis, for reasons presumably to de-link its own future from white Rhodesia's, to curry a degree of international favour and also reflecting the Afrikaner-dominated ruling National Party's deep-seated antipathy towards British colonial and settler regimes. Then, as now, the Rhodesian regime was vulnerable to South African sentiment – the military had assessed that without Pretoria's acquiescence, the

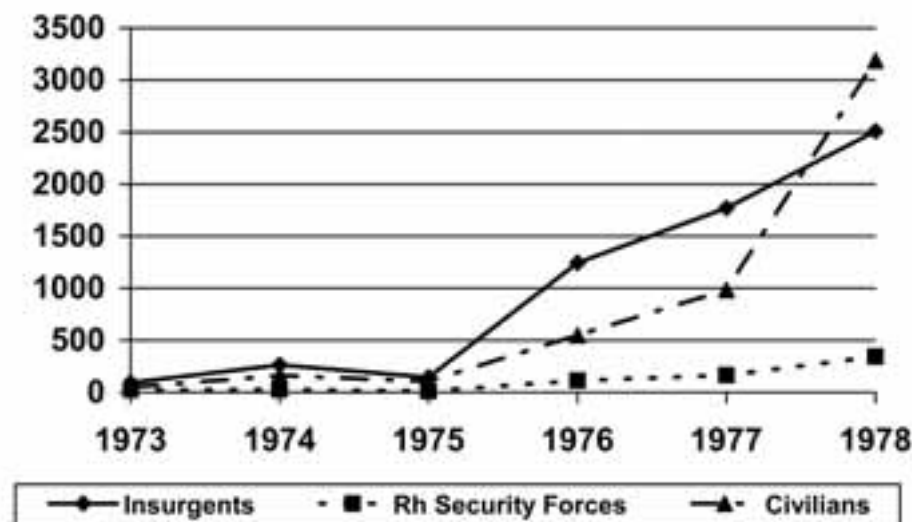
country would collapse in two weeks.

At the same time, the guerrilla armies had changed their own tactics, their greater numbers reflecting the extent of their regional and international support, visible in their brazenness and willingness to attack high-profile civilian targets whatever the international reaction. Most notable in this regard were the two Surface-to-Air (SAM) missile attacks on Rhodesian civilian Viscount aircraft in September 1978 and February 1979 by ZIPRA forces, killing a total of 102 passengers and crew. Ten survivors of the fifty-eight in the first aircraft shot down were shot at the wreckage site by the guerrillas. The Viscount incidents were more costly in that they made it impossible for the white government to be seen to be talking to Nkomo's ZAPU, undoing the main hope to politically engineer a viable, anti-Mugabe, non-racial coalition.

By 1979, Rhodesian forces were heavily stretched. By March, white men in the 50-59 year age-group were liable for call-up duties. The terrorist war now entered a final conventional phase, with the hopes for a peaceful transition via the Muzorewa internal settlement dashed by the outcome of the aforementioned Carter visit. The Rhodesian security forces mounted further raids into Zambia (in September, destroying no less than ten bridges) and Mozambique (including a major offensive in September again into Gaza Province). The actions against the Zambian bridges were to ensure that President Kaunda was forced to maintain his dependence on Rhodesian rail routes opened in 1978, itself an attempt to ensure his support for a negotiated political settlement favourable to (white) Rhodesian interests.

At the same time, in September 1979, the Rhodesian government began negotiations with ZANU and ZAPU at Lancaster House, leading to the ceasefire that December and the reinstatement of British rule with the arrival of the governor-general Lord Soames in Salisbury the same month. The process culminated in the elections of February 1979. On 18 April 1980, colonial Rhodesia became independent Zimbabwe with Robert Mugabe installed

Table 1: Annual Deaths: Zimbabwe War, 1973-78¹⁶



Source: Official Rhodesian Sources cited in Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia*, p.242.



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as Prime Minister, the advent of what comprises nearly three decades of increasingly ruinous rule.

Reflections on Rhodesian Military Strategy

Even though the Rhodesian forces were able to hold their own in security terms by the war's end, they had to face major challenges along the way. These included:

Shortage of Manpower

The shortage of manpower overall was exacerbated by the slowness to recruit Africans into the security forces. The vast reserve of black manpower was not effectively used until late in the war, recruitment being limited by both money and, especially, politics – the government being unwilling to have more blacks than whites in the military. Only by 1979 had two further battalions of the black-dominated Rhodesian

Even by the start of 1980, the situation was not militarily lost

African Rifles been created, bringing the total to three. Despite the racial nature of the struggle, the black troops that made up 40 per cent of the regular army at the war's end were both conscientious and loyal – in stark contrast, for example, to the varied loyalties of large chunks of the post-Saddam Iraqi police and army in the current counter-insurgency campaign. The failure to recruit larger numbers of black troops into the army earlier must be viewed as a key mistake by the Smith regime. Personnel shortfalls were partly met through increasing national service: going from four-and-half months' initial service to eight months, then to a year, then eighteen months and finally two years; and by increasing the mobilization of reservists. The latter especially placed considerable strain on individuals and the economy. Strategically, the Rhodesians also attempted to maintain control over the whole territory rather than to focus on key areas; tactically, troop shortages were amplified by having to deploy large numbers of men

in static positions to guard fixed installations such as railways and farms.

Equipment Deficit

This was especially notable in high-tech items such as night-vision equipment, but overall in terms of the scarcity of essential air support. A number of coping strategies were adopted to deal with the shortage of aircraft and age of airframes in Rhodesian hands. Rhodesian strength was increased by pilot flexibility, most being able to fly all of the aircraft in the Air Force inventory. Pilots were continuously rotated through the various squadrons. Aircraft and crew were also supplemented by South African secondments, though this was used as a political lever by Pretoria, the helicopters being withdrawn from Rhodesia in 1976 during the attempts by South African Prime Minister John Vorster to negotiate an end to the conflict. Most of the (ultimately totalling sixty-six) RhAF Alouettes were on loan from the South African Air Force, along with many of the helicopter aircrew. These men were 'sheep-dipped', operating in Rhodesian uniform, and becoming temporary RhAF personnel. During some of the larger external Rhodesian raids in 1979, South African Air Force Pumas and Super Frelons operated in support of Rhodesian forces, such as during Operation *Uric* in September 1979. Also, South African naval forces, notably its strike craft, were constantly used in support of operations into Mozambique, operating from their major base at Durban, though submarines were used on at least two occasions for incursions into Maputo. The shortage of equipment also influenced tactics. For example, ground patrolling was supplemented by the use of Cessna Lynxes using fragmentation and concussion bombs or napalm. A lack of troop-carrying helicopters (a 'stick' of only three or four troops could be carried in the Alouettes), led to the use of para-drops from Dakotas. Late in the war, some eleven Bell UH-1 'Huey' helicopters, able to carry eight fully-equipped troops, were acquired from Israel, though these were in poor repair and only half the fleet was still flying by the war's end. But the availability of equipment was not the be-all and end-all of the war's course.

Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence
Although Rhodesian intelligence was usually accurate, on a number of raids this was countered by the forewarning of guerrillas. But the invisibility and difficulty in predicting guerrilla activities and movements relates less to a failure of intelligence than a failure of local knowledge and, above all, of politics. Where there was a high level of expertise (for example, in some areas of the Special Branch), the sheer volume of work was overwhelming. In the area of counter-intelligence, it has long been suspected that the Rhodesian security forces were penetrated at a senior level, though the evidence is anecdotal. If so, some of these tip-offs may have been deliberate: for example, the likely leak to ZAPU announcing the SAS retaliation raid (for the Viscount shootings) on Joshua Nkomo's Lusaka residence in April 1979. His death would have been, self-evidently, contrary to the need to strike a political bargain with the veteran black nationalist, though Salisbury clearly needed to be seen to be taking action against ZIPRA. Care was taken with radio transmission given the known presence of an East German-manned intercept station in Nampula in Mozambique. It has also been suggested that the Rhodesians may have been vulnerable to foreign (i.e., Russian) satellite intelligence. Certainly, no precautions were taken in this regard, though little lead time was given in operational decisions and there were little in the way of public build-ups to give outward warning.

Troop Morale

Continuous action for those on the frontline took its toll in casualties and in growing social problems within the military. For example, before 1975, SAS personnel would be on operations for six weeks with just a five-day rest between rotations. As Chris Cocks observes after his three-year stint in the Rhodesian Light Infantry, '[s]uch habits, formed during the war that was their *raison d'être* proved hard to break. Many of my comrades still tend to drink too much. I am an alcoholic. All of us started at the top of the mountain, young and full of hope. But our parents' war changed all

that. There was no glory – just drink, drugs and death.²⁰ Such sentiments reflected rising casualties. According to official statistics, between 1972 and 1976, 215 members of the security forces and 1,917 insurgents died; in 1977 alone, the casualties were 197 security personnel and 1,774 rebels.²¹ Problems with morale both reflected and were aggravated by absenteeism and emigration.

Social Problems

Aside from the obvious dangers to white farmers targeted by the guerrillas to drive them off the land and the constant tensions involved, the strain of the war resulted in increases in social breakdown among the white population, including alcoholism, illegitimacy and divorce. These problems were also reflected in the difficulties of military discipline: as the strain of operations increased, so the officers needed to be tougher in their application of discipline in key units.

Finances and Economic Impact

In absolute terms, Rhodesian defence expenditure remained low. By 1979, it was just a million Rhodesian dollars a day (around US\$470 million annually). But in relative terms, the load increased dramatically during the 1970s: defence expenditure rose 610 per cent from 1971-72 and 1977-78, and on the police by 232 per cent over the same period. Put

differently, in 1976, defence expenditure consumed 25 per cent of the total budget; by 1979, it was 47 per cent.²² In spite of around 50 per cent South Africa subsidization, these increases were funded partly by tax increases (such as the 12.5 per cent surcharge on income tax imposed in July 1978). Coupled with sanctions, the war saw a decline in Rhodesia's gross national product of 1.1 per cent in 1975, 3.4 per cent in 1976 and 6.9 per cent in 1977. Income from tourism, for example, a chief economic contributor, declined by some 74 per cent from 1972-78.²³ For example, the numbers of tourists declined from 240,000 in 1972, to 88,000 in 1978.

Protecting the Population

In line with the aim of protecting (or separating) the population from guerrillas, thereby preventing infiltration, resettlement was also utilized, *à la* Malaya, of which the Rhodesian SAS 'C Squadron' had direct experience. This initially took the form of an extension of the 'no-go' area declared along the north-eastern border areas in 1972.²⁴ Estimates of the total population gathered into the Protected Villages are thought to be some 750,000 Africans in 200 villages. Yet Beckett notes, 'Too frequently, however, PVs were regarded purely as a means of population control rather than as a basis for winning "hearts and minds".' Conditions varied in PVs,

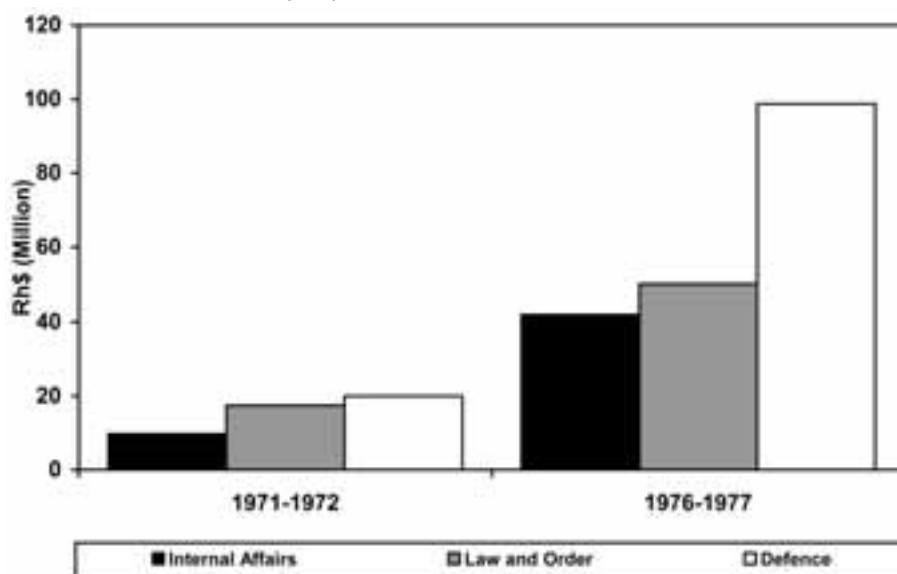
but many lacked sanitation and other basic facilities. The villages were also inadequately defended, with the result that the population that might have collaborated with the security forces were frightened by the possible consequences.²⁵

Losing Hearts and Minds

The winning of 'hearts and minds' of the African population 'left much to be desired'. The shortcomings reflected the Rhodesian preference for control rather than concessions, such as the extension in the use of martial law to govern, its application increasing to over some 70 per cent of the country by September 1978 and to over 90 per cent one year later.²⁶ The original scheme to 'win hearts and minds' was developed originally by (Lieutenant) Ian Sheppard in 1973. The so-called 'Sheppard Group' aimed to 'sell' the PVs to the Africans through a variety of projects such as an African Development Bank, the inoculation of cattle and the granting of land title to resettled Africans. However, the majority of the thirty-eight projects proposed met insurmountable opposition from the ministries of Internal Affairs and Information, and the group collapsed in November 1974. It was not until little under three years later, in July 1977, that a Psychological Operations Unit was established. Yet this foundered on continued rivalry with the police Special Branch and resistance from senior military personnel. Similarly, a Directorate of Psychological Warfare was established in 1979 but proved ineffectual, in spite of some reported success in using spirit mediums (witchdoctors).

However, the government's 'concentration of increasing African political representation meant little', Beckett notes, 'to the average African and rarely offered a viable alternative' in the face of fearsome and often deadly guerrilla intimidation. Any government, especially one lacking legitimacy and lateral thinking such as the Smith regime post-UDI, was never going to be able to effectively counter the terror tactics employed as a deliberate weapon of war by the insurgents. For many Africans, the war inflicted tremendous costs, in terms

Table 2: Rhodesian Security Expenditure



of the creation of refugees and displaced persons and loss of livelihoods.²⁷ Before the war, African farmers had produced 70 per cent of national food requirements. This fell by one third by 1977. As Beckett notes, 'Africans were caught in the real sense between intimidation both by security forces and guerrillas.' By 1979, over 900 African primary and secondary schools had closed, leaving around 230,000 pupils without access to education, while over ninety rural hospitals and clinics had also shut and rural bus services had been cut by half.²⁸ The population was also not fooled by the creation of internal alternatives (such as Muzorewa's Zimbabwe-Rhodesia option) which lacked credibility. It is thus unsurprising that the adoption of a 'carrot and stick' approach to the obtaining of information, through direct financial rewards to amnesties (offered in both December 1977 and March 1979), met again with only limited success.

Time

Time was never on the Rhodesians' side. As Malaya and Northern Ireland illustrate, countering insurgency requires a long-term approach, a duration implicit in tactics such as the PVs and in the engendering of the tenets of trust, law and order, and political inclusiveness upon which a resilient and successful society is based. Instead, the security forces took their lead from their political masters who were politically bankrupt and irrevocably tainted, thus favouring expediency over long-term strategy.

In spite of the abovementioned issues, even by the start of 1980, the situation was not militarily lost, even though resources were stretched and the military were struggling, in particular, with the effects of white emigration. Despite active and ongoing contestation and the direct involvement of FRELIMO troops ('Fred's' as they were known the Rhodesian troops) in Rhodesia, and Tanzanians on the border area, the Rhodesian security forces had not surrendered any major territory. As one indicator, the guerrilla forces, in spite of stretching the Rhodesians over two fronts, had not succeeded in establishing any uncontested 'liberated zones'. To the

contrary, to the East RENAMO had achieved rapid success, prompting the question as to whether the Rhodesian high command should have used the rebels to attempt to establish such liberated zones within Mozambique, thereby splitting the country in half.

Rhodesian success was the result partly of guerrilla ineptitude, partly the result of the adoption of some distinct tactics by the Rhodesian security forces to address their manpower and other resource shortages, including, for example, the development of the 'Fireforce' rapid deployment concept. Seeking to offset lack of men through the concentration of firepower and mobility, four Fireforces, comprising thirty men each, were constantly available, two being manned by the RLI and the other two by the Rhodesian African Rifles. By mid-1979, the Fireforces accounted for 75 per cent of all guerrilla casualties inside Rhodesia.²⁹ The Fireforce idea worked well in taking the fight directly to the insurgent and in reducing exposure and risk along logistics routes, but it placed an inordinate strain on troops. There was one instance of these units being para-dropped three times in one day in different operational engagements, a world record. The flexibility of Rhodesian forces was improved by the wide freedom granted to operational commanders. The constraints on operations were seldom political, even in calling in cross-border strikes, a degree of latitude that demanded strict discipline, outstanding junior leaders, good training, and careful debriefing. The high quality of school-leaving recruits into the Rhodesian forces and their simple but thorough training focusing on getting the basics right showed in combat, notably in the elite units.

The Rhodesian security forces also attempted to deal with the shortage of manpower both by pre-emptive strikes into the host countries and the establishment of a cordon sanitaire of border minefields, established from May 1974 onwards. Eventually, nearly 900 kilometres of minefields were laid along the Zambian and Mozambican frontiers. But the costs were high, the system demanded high maintenance, and it

certainly did not present an impassable barrier to the insurgents. On the other side, the guerrillas' widespread use of landmines also led to the development of a range of specially designed mine-resistant troop-carrying vehicles such as the Rhino, Hyena, and Hippo, featuring a V-shaped body to deflect blast, and also the use of novel local counter-measures such as the use of water in the tyres of transports. These vehicle types later spawned a similar range of South African vehicles, including the Buffel and Casspir. The cross-border raids were responsible for the bulk of insurgents killed during the war. Although effective in a military sense, they had political costs. The

Unlike South Africa in the 1980s, the Rhodesians had to place almost no resources on domestic policing. The black townships were not sources of political unrest, or even threat

Rhodesians had few political allies, notably their South African quartermaster, but the latter were largely unprepared to tolerate the international fallout resulting from sending armed forces into a neighbouring country with which it was not at war. The military value of the operations also had to be weighed against the perception of 'every such action ... as the wanton murder of innocent refugees who have fled from an oppressive regime.'³⁰

The Rhodesians had some successes with so-called 'pseudo operations' by which members of the security forces as well as captured guerrillas 'turned' by the former, were employed to infiltrate guerrilla organizations, sowing discord and gaining information. They were originally formed along the lines of the British pseudo-gangs used in Kenya during the Mau Mau emergency of the 1950s. From its initial start in the mid-1960s, the concept later developed into the formation of the Selous Scouts as a

reconnaissance, tracking and, ultimately, commando fighting unit. By the war's end, the Scouts comprised around 1,800 men, three times the size of a normal infantry battalion, hardly allowing them to be the secret, covert force they needed to be.³¹ The 'pseudos' – or *skuzapu* as the insurgents knew them – were ultimately to largely (but not entirely) abandon their pseudo-rationale for a cross-border strike role.

However, the Scouts and others units were initially able to make great strides in the supply of tactical intelligence. But the use of the observation posts they employed depended, fundamentally, on studying local patterns – of the use of food and water and the movement of people – to ascertain whether guerrillas could be present. Successful counter-insurgency campaigns need to be cerebral rather than physical.

Nonetheless, the intelligence supplied never could be a complete picture. The insurgents, through a mix of empathy, race, language, cause or terror, achieved at least the passive co-operation of local inhabitants. After the conflict ratcheted up in the early 1970s (around the time of Operation *Hurricane* commencing in December 1972), it became a 'new' war. In this war there was little space for neutrals; and Rhodesian efforts to entice (or even terrorize) the African population into co-operation were mired in issues of race and legitimacy.

Such an intrinsic political advantage, as Iraq and Afghanistan have also shown, is sufficient to allow insurgents to overcome considerable tactical weaknesses in combat skills and weapons.³² Hence, many in the local population would certainly know who and where the insurgents were and where they stored their explosives and weapons, but in most cases they were reluctant to tell. Technical and technological means can do little to overcome this political deficit, even if the Rhodesians had possessed it. Of course, insurgents seldom expose themselves unless it is on their terms. And just as the insurgency itself took covert forms including bombings, sabotage, and assassinations, so did the Rhodesians use such dirty tricks. But even the killing of

the insurgents' leaders and heroes had little perceptible impact on overall outcome, since these tactical actions could not overshadow the overall political process or negate the guerrillas' immutable racial advantage, granting them a local, regional and international legitimacy that they never lost sight of or failed to employ to their advantage.

Conclusion: Are there Lessons for Others?

There are many differences between the insurgency faced by Rhodesia and those today underway in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, there are relevant aspects and lessons.

There are many legacies to the war in Rhodesia in its transition to Zimbabwe, not least of them the ethno-political rivalries of the various nationalist movements that the war had been midwife to but had, however, left festering and unresolved. This war was not just about democracy and liberation, but was fundamentally concerned with racial identity – essentially of the role of black citizens in their country. This struggle has wider regional ripples today, notably for South Africa's own democratic maturation and, indeed, in its relationship with its northern neighbour. The transfer of power immediately to the guerrilla movements illustrated also the considerable level of solidarity and ingenuity displayed by the white settler community was itself insufficient to defeat the guerrilla armies. So, too, were attempts to infuse African ownership through internal political accommodation, at one level, and, at another, significant African representation in the security forces.³³

It is apparently callous, yet sadly debatable in terms of human development, whether the war overall created more or less hardship for Zimbabweans, especially in the light of recent post-independence economic and political choices and developments. But the two events are not unrelated. For example, it is moot whether the Rhodesian forces hung on too long (thereby setting the stage for and fomenting the divisions besetting Zimbabwe today) or whether, indeed, they did not hang on long enough, thus

enabling transition to a different type of leader in improved global and national political circumstances. The answer to such questions, however, lies in the realm of speculation. What we know about Rhodesia's counter-insurgency strategy is that a plan is important – Salisbury possessed little in the way of an overall political plan in which the military was employed as a decisive element. Much was improvised. Minorities, whatever their level of personal bravery and military derring-do, cannot counter an insurgency without the political co-option of the majority community. In Rhodesia, a political solution with moderate black leaders depended on international recognition and this, in turn, demanded involving black leadership who possessed the necessary legitimacy. UDI, itself a product of short-sighted leadership, thwarted the search for credible black partners.

We know, too, that development is crucial to winning a population over. In Rhodesia there was too little attention focused, both before and – as we know now in the light of the disastrous land redistribution scheme subsequently engineered by Mr Mugabe – after the war, on improving the access of Africans to the better farming lands and to the economy overall. It is also possible to conclude that winning hearts and minds has to go beyond political representation and instead revolve around understanding the needs and insecurities of the population most contested. In this regard, the Rhodesians' efforts were constantly at risk of being undermined by arrogance, lack of understanding and empathy often born of paternalism and racism. It remains unclear why the population at large was so passive. Unlike South Africa in the 1980s, the Rhodesians had to place almost no resources on domestic policing. The black townships were not sources of political unrest, or even threat. This may have been central to why the Rhodesians did so well for so long, and, in today's context, why President Mugabe has remained in power.

Yet the military successes enjoyed by the Rhodesians demonstrate, too, a number of key elements – that



Unveiling of the 'Troopie' (a Rhodesian private) statue, sculpted by Mike Blackman, at the 1 RLI Barracks on 1 February 1979. Picture published and distributed by Rhodesian Department of Information and Tourism, 1979.

technology, including air assets, is not vital if there is a great enough appetite for danger and sufficient stomach for casualties on the part of those countering the insurgency. In some operations, a 25-30 per cent casualty rate was deemed acceptable in the planning of the mission. Also, the delegation of responsibility to and development of junior leadership were key assets in the prosecution of the war from a Rhodesian standpoint. This demanded thorough training and a willingness to risk both mistakes and lives in building this confidence and capability. Technology cannot be a war-winner on its own.

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the real reason for Rhodesia's difficulties and eventual transition lay not in the capability of its security forces, but in the absence of an effective parallel political strategy. This only occurred with the Lancaster House settlement. It is conventional wisdom that insurgencies can only be countered by a political deal – indeed, it is the failure of politics that results in the military's involvement in countering insurgencies in the first instance. At best, military means can pressure and shape this outcome. In the case of Rhodesia, it was the prevailing political rather than security considerations that eventually determined the outcome. While the

Rhodesian security forces performed well with meagre resources, they facilitated an outcome that few of them had anticipated and wished for, the conclusion of which was the result of unimaginative, ineffectual and often dour political leadership. Very few, if any, military officers had the time (if indeed they possessed the will) to question the absence of political direction. For the key question in countering insurgency – 'What can we do to make the enemy's life more difficult and to improve our own?' – should be asked constantly by both the military and politicians.

Rarely do insurgents, in Rhodesia as elsewhere, lose the political aspect of their struggle in spite of their performance in the field, the latter often a function of superior equipment, training, technology, mobility and operational coherence of those countering the insurgency. Thus the Rhodesian experience should teach us, above all else, that what is required to counter insurgency are superior *political* tactics and strategy, from the local to the global level. ■

Notes

1 This article describes the forces, places and the authorities as they were then constituted and denoted.

- 2 At the peak by 1979, made up of around 3,400 regulars with the remainder conscripts. This figure was supplemented by around 45,000 BSA police (of which 8,000 were regulars, the remainder reservists).
- 3 By the Rhodesian Security Forces' own estimates, the number of guerrillas operating inside Rhodesia grew from 350 or 400 in July 1974 to 700 by March 1976, 2,350 by April 1977, 5,598 by November 1977, 6,456 by March 1978, to 11,183 by January 1979 and as many as 12,500 by the end of the war. At the time of the ceasefire in December 1979, an estimated 22,000 ZIPRA and 16,000 ZANLA guerrillas remained outside the country, although not all were trained. See Ian Beckett, *The Rhodesian Army: Counter-Insurgency, 1972-1979*, accessed at http://members.tripod.com/selousscouts/rhodesian%20army%20coin%2072_79%20part2.htm.
- 4 The First Chimurenga is celebrated in Zimbabwe as the First War of Independence, also known as the Second Matabele War, referring to the 1896-97 revolt against the British South Africa Company's colonial rule.
- 5 See, for example, Ron Reid-Daly as told to Peter Stiff, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (South Africa, Galago, 1982); Barbara Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian SAS* (South Africa: Three Knights, 1984); and Peter Stiff, *See you in November* (South Africa: Galago, 1987). Some Rhodesians came to believe their own mythologies: As *TIME* Johannesburg Bureau Chief William McWhirter quoted one senior non-commissioned officer in 1978: 'We have created a top-rate bush fighter. You can drop an average reserve troopie [private] anywhere in the country at night with a compass, and he can give you a six-figure grid reading which can put you within 100 yards of his position.' See *TIME*, 27 February 1978, accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,919355-1,00.html>.
- 6 A notable exemption is Jakkie Cilliers' account of the conflict, *Counter Insurgency in Rhodesia* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), written originally as a MA thesis and the result of travel and interviews throughout Zimbabwe.
- 7 Including civilians in Mozambique and Zambia. At <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/gukurahundi.html>. Officially the war cost the deaths of 410 white and 691 black civilians, but these figures were clearly understated.
- 8 Not including external casualties of the guerrilla organizations,
- 9 ZAPU was formed in 1962, and almost immediately banned by the Whitehead government; ZANU was formed in August 1963 as a result of Nkomo's expulsion from ZAPU of Ndabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe, Leopold Takawira, and Washington Malianga, as a result of their opposition to his leadership.
- 10 Umkhonto we Sizwe, or Spear of the Nation.
- 11 Cilliers, *op cit*, p.12.
- 12 Cited in Cilliers, *op cit*, p.13.

- 13 Made up of Dakota paratroop and helicopter-borne troops comprising 97 SAS, and 88 RLI soldiers.
- 14 Some estimates put the base numbers as high as 12,000. The attack is vividly described in Chris Cocks' sobering account of his service in the Rhodesian Army, *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (South Africa: Covos Day, 2001), pp.144-46. The raid led to the largest air effort yet marshaled by the Rhodesians, though the age and serviceability of the aircraft was one indication of their problems: 42 helicopters, eight Hawker Hunters, six Vampires, three Canberras, six Dakotas and around one dozen Lynxes (a militarized version of the Cessna Super Skymaster). At the peak of its strength during the insurgency, the Rhodesian Air Force had a maximum strength of 2,300 personnel. Of this number, only 150 were pilots actively involved in combat operations. In the Chimoio raid, the largest such joint-force operation of the war, over 1,200 guerrillas and dependents, some of them women and children, were killed.
- 15 The name, after the 19th century explorer Courtney Selous, was originally given to an armoured car unit constituted in 1961 and later relinquished to the special forces pseudo guerrilla unit upon its creation in 1973.
- 16 Note that the figures only refer to the insurgents killed within Zimbabwe. The wounded can be computed on the ratio of 6.5:1.
- 17 Muzorewa was teamed in an alliance that included the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole and Chief Jeremiah Chirau.
- 18 It is estimated that, by the war's end in 1980, the South African government was directly and indirectly footing the bill for around half of Rhodesian defence expenditure.
- 19 Officially, in 1971 the country had 9,403 white immigrants; in 1976, 7,072 residents left, and in 1978, 13,709.
- 20 Cocks, *op cit*, p.272.
- 21 Ronald Weitzer, *Transforming Settler States: Communal Conflict and Internal Security in Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, sourced at <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft2199n7jp/>
- 22 From 1971-1972 to 1976-1977 the budget for the Ministry of Internal Affairs (previously the Department of Native Affairs) jumped from R\$9.7 million to R\$42 million; that for the Ministry of Law and Order (including police) jumped from R\$17.5 million to R\$50 million; and expenditure for the Ministry of Defense grew from R\$20 million to R\$98.7 million. See Government of Southern Rhodesia, *Estimates of Expenditure*. Salisbury: Government Printer, 1971-1972 and 1976-1977.
- 23 Beckett, *op cit*.
- 24 For example, under 'Operation Overload' in July 1974 over 46,000 Africans were removed from the Chiweshe area into 21 protected villages and some 13,500 people from the Madziwa area. Officially there were 116 PVs by August 1976, 178 by September 1977 and 234 planned or built by January 1978.
- 25 Beckett, *op cit*.
- 26 *Ibid*.
- 27 It is estimated that over one-third of the African cattle herd died during the war while, with only 1,500 out of 8,000 cattle dips still in operation in 1979, disease such as anthrax and tsetse, again became rampant.
- 28 Beckett, *op cit*.
- 29 *Ibid*.
- 30 Major-General Arthur Bruce Campling, 'Pseudo-Terrorist Operations in Rhodesia,' undated mimeo.
- 31 See http://members.tripod.com/selousscouts/rhodesian_army.htm.
- 32 On the parallels with Iraq and Afghanistan, see, for example, Edward Luttwak, 'Dead End: Counter Insurgency as Military Malpractice', Harper's, February 2007, at <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2007/02/0081384>.
- 33 By 1979 blacks comprised 40 per cent of the 15,000 army personnel and 60 per cent of the British South African Police. Many, however, apparently enlisted for economic reasons. See Weitzer, *op cit*.

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