

# FIRE FORCE

## Helicopter Warfare in Rhodesia: 1962-1980

by Prof. J.R.T. Wood

In December 1976, an Aérospatiale Alouette III helicopter (configured as a troop-carrying 'G-Car')<sup>1</sup> was rocked by a volley of 7.62mm rounds at 800 feet as it descended towards the tree savannah of central Rhodesia. Flown by Flight Lieutenant Victor Bernard Cook, the G-Car was carrying a Rhodesian Army medic on a mercy mission to treat an African civilian, who had been wounded in a contact that morning.



The bullets, flashing up from a clearing in the trees, were fired by 27 members of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) (supporting Robert Mugabe) whose base camp Cook was about to overfly. They severed the Alouette's tail rotor shaft and wounded Cook in the right foot and arms. His technician, Finch Bellringer, was semi-conscious after being hit by two rounds which penetrated his body armour. The medic was mercifully unhurt but shocked.

Vic Cooke told his story to Deon du Plessis of *The Star* (published on 15 April 1977). Du Plessis wrote that Cooke (33) was flying with his technician and an army medical orderly to pick up African civilians who had been injured. An army patrol was with the civilians, waiting for Cook to arrive. Cook was at 1000m when his helicopter came under heavy fire. He felt some rounds hit his aircraft, and, unable to see where the fire was coming from, took evasive action, plunging down to tree level.

I levelled off but, I was still under heavy fire. I was almost on top of them. A lot more rounds hit us. It was fierce. I felt the controls going, there was vibration. I realised I had to force land. The fire got fiercer. I picked a place to land. Then I lost tail rotor control. The chopper swung violently. It would have started cartwheeling. I pulled it up on its tail to knock off forward speed. The speed came down but we continued to yaw. Still I was quite pleased with what was happening as I had a semblance of control. I touched the power but could not hold it down on to its tail. I managed to pull the nose up a little. All the time they were still shooting. Then I saw them. I thought : There are about as many as a rugby team.

Coming in for a forced landing, Cook saw a group of about five terrorists standing ahead of him shooting. Cook made his decision : 'I aimed the aircraft at them deliberately. We thumped down nose first and I lost sight of them.' As they landed a piece of the control column came off in Cook's hand. The thump of the landing jerked Cook forward. His jaw struck the top of the control stick, stunning him and cutting his chin deeply. His foot was badly gashed. Cook did not realise it and did not know how it happened. 'The engine was still running and I left it idling, hoping this would make them think we were all right.' Cook's memory was hazy. His Uzi had been hit and was useless. The medic's FN was bent. 'I knew the buggers were coming back. I needed a weapon. Then I saw this terr lying beyond the chopper. He may have been hit by the rotor when we came down. I don't know. But he had an AK and all I knew was he was between me and that weapon. I grabbed his AK and shot him with it. He was shouting in Shona when I shot him. I don't know what he was doing. I don't remember if we even struggled. I shouted to the medic and tech : 'Run for the high ground'. I ran, but then saw they were not following me. I shouted again : 'Let's move!' But the tech said : 'I can't move.' The tech had been shot while they were in the air. Together Cook and the medic dragged the tech to the higher ground. Cook then saw the terrorists moving in the bush 100 metres away. Cook ran forward and fired a magazine from his AK at them. 'I saw other movement and I bolted to another position and ripped off another burst.' Cook then positioned himself between the enemy and his crew. 'Then I went out further and did a few circuits of the chopper. The movement disappeared and I moved from tree to tree and rock to rock. I was in a good

strong position.'

Cook was 'bloody angry' at being forced down, and wanted to pursue the terrorists. But he kept tripping and only then did he see the deep gash in his foot. He could see the bone. 'After that I didn't feel so aggressive,' he said. He helped the medic erect a drip stand on the wounded technician. Of the medical orderly, Cook said 'He was a star. At no stage did he abandon his patient.'

The Rhodesian Army unit, which had called Cook from Rutenga (in south eastern Rhodesia) was close by and heard the crash and the firing. It summoned help. Fifty minutes later a Reims Cessna FTB 337G 'Lynx', twin-engined light aircraft, arrived overhead, to be followed shortly by the Fire Force. Cook and his crew were evacuated by helicopter and a follow-up on the tracks on his attackers was instituted. Cook recalled : 'There were four brown jobs. They were a beautiful sight.' Cook was awarded the Silver Cross but said he did not believe that he deserved it. 'Not when you see what the browns do. Those RLI guys, they are all Silver Cross material.' <sup>2</sup>

For his gallantry, Victor Cook was awarded the Silver Cross of Rhodesia.<sup>3</sup>

Flying the helicopter came later in the life of the always small, if potent, Rhodesian Air Force. When the helicopter was adopted, its agility - its ability to hover, to land and take-off in almost impossible terrain - was exploited to the full by the Rhodesians in their counter-insurgency war. Indeed the Rhodesians were to produce a unique and deadly variant of the tactic of 'vertical envelopment' of a target by helicopter-borne infantry which they called 'Fire Force'.

There was nothing new in the military use of helicopters. As soon as helicopters were available, the air forces and armies of the world gave them a multitude of tasks. The first workable machines appeared in the Second World War - the American Sikorsky R-6A and the German Flettner F1 282 Kolibri. Helicopters found general use thereafter. They were used for casualty evacuation in Korea and for moving forces to combat insurgents in Malaya, French Indo-China and in Kenya. In Algeria the French developed the use of armed helicopters, the first 'gunships' (armed Alouette IIs) working with parachute troops and helicopter-borne infantry (carried in American Vertol H-21 twin rotor helicopters) to isolate and eliminate insurgent units.

There was a clear need for helicopters in Rhodesia but almost all of the terrain was over 2 000 feet above sea level and the climate was hot. As height and heat drastically reduced the efficiency of helicopter engines, a special helicopter was required. Such a helicopter was to be developed by the French who took the lead early on in the race to design light turboshaft engines. The man of vision in France was Joseph Szydlowski, who founded the Société Turboméca in 1938 and worked on small gas turbines throughout the Second World War despite Nazi occupation of his factory. By 1949 he produced the Artouste Mark II gas turbine which produced 400 shaft horse power (shp) and, at 253 lbs, weighed less than half than any equivalent piston engine. The American Boeing Company was working on gas turbines and one powered the first gas-turbine helicopter in the world, the Kaman K-225 twin-rotor 'egg-beater' of the US Navy, which flew on 10 December 1951. But Boeing soon lost interest and left the field to the French.

In 1953 the Artouste Mark II replaced the radial piston engine of the small crop-spraying helicopter, the Sud-Aviation (later Aérospatiale) SE3120 Alouette [Lark]. This gave it such a unique performance that Société Turboméca became the leading supplier of small turbine helicopter engines in the western world.

The Alouette II had an open girder frame, exposed engine, skid landing gear and bubble canopy. Aside from the pilot it could carry four passengers, or two stretchers and two sitting wounded, or a 1 100 lb load - either in a sling under the fuselage, or in the form of guns, missiles or homing torpedoes. In June 1955 this little helicopter set a new world height record by climbing to 26 932 feet and found a ready market in 33 countries.

Turboméca's next jet engine, the Astazou (derated from 530 to 350 shp)<sup>4</sup> gave constant power under any conditions of height and hot climate. It doubled the load-carrying capacity of the Alouette II and led to even wider sales. The Indian version, the HAL Cheetah, landed and took-off at heights above 24 600 feet in the Himalayas. In June 1958 the Alouette II set a height record for helicopters at 36 037 feet. The arrival of the even more powerful Artouste engine (derated from 870 to 570 shp) resulted in the bigger Alouette III which first flew on 28 February 1959 and was soon performing spectacularly. In June 1960, it landed and took-off with seven people on board at an altitude of 15 780 feet on Mount Blanc in the French Alps. In November 1960, carrying two crew members and a 550 lbs load, it landed and took-off at an altitude of 19 698 ft. This was unprecedented in the world of helicopters.

The Alouette III SA316B could accommodate the pilot and six fully equipped troops. The Rhodesian practice was to carry a technician and four troops and to mount a FN 7.62mm MAG machine-gun [after 1976 twin Mk 2 .303 Brownings - the RAF's turret and wing guns of the Second World War] at the port rear door. The passenger seats were easily removed, allowing the carriage of a variety of different loads. Experience in combat led the Rhodesians to remove the doors and to reverse the front passenger seats to widen the available floorspace and gain flexibility. Casualties could be put on the floor. It was easier to leave the helicopter quickly and more could be carried.<sup>5</sup> There was provision for an external sling for cargoes weighing up to 1 650 lbs (750 kgs). A hoist could be fitted with a 380 lbs (175 kgs) capacity to allow casualties and other loads to be winched up. The Alouette III could carry two stretcher cases and two seated wounded.

Produced after first flying on 27 June 1968 and exported after 1970, the SA319B Alouette III was powered by the Astazou XIV (derated from 870 to 600 shp) which was even more effective in 'hot and high' conditions and more economical. The SA319B had strengthened main and tail rotor transmissions. It weighed slightly more but could carry a heavier payload.

The Alouette III SA316B had a maximum speed of 124 mph at sea level and a cruising speed of 115 mph. The Alouette III's service ceiling was 13 100 feet and it had a hovering ceiling in ground effect of 9 450 feet. Out of ground effect, the hovering ceiling was 5 000 feet. Its range at optimum altitude is given at 335 miles. SA319B had a slightly longer range. In practice these ranges were considerably shorter. Under Rhodesian conditions, when loaded with troops, the Alouette would fly at 65 knots (or 75 mph) and, with a light load, at 84 knots (or 97 mph). At 84 knots, its range was 242 miles (210 nautical miles). The Alouette III SA316B 'K-Car' gunship, armed with a 20mm cannon and ammunition, and a crew of three, would have an endurance of an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half when loaded with 600 lbs of fuel. The Alouette III SA316B troop-carrying 'G-Car' with 400 lbs of fuel, a crew of two and four fully equipped troops had an average endurance of forty-five minutes.

The Alouette III is a magnificent military machine, capable of being operated well beyond what its designers expected. It uses jet fuel (paraffin) but can operate on diesel - and petrol in a dire emergency [and only for a short flight]. It is capable of absorbing astonishing quantities of small arms fire and even hits from anti-tank rockets. An Alouette III, flown by Ted Lunt and carrying Major Pieter Farndell of Support Commando, Rhodesian Light Infantry, was hit in the tail section by an RPG7 rocket and still brought them home safely. On 14 October 1978, Dick Paxton's Alouette III, with Major Nigel Henson (also of Support Commando) aboard, was riddled by small arms fire when Paxton flew it slowly at a low altitude over a hidden insurgent camp. Paxton was caught like this because of confusion over an incorrect map reference supplied by the personnel of an observation position (OP) overlooking the camp. With all instruments shattered and a blade punctured, Paxton was still able to climb to his operational height, 800 feet, orbit, and put down suppressive fire, before flying out.<sup>6</sup> The celebrated pilot and, later, Selous Scout, Michael Borlace, brought an Alouette III home to Fort Victoria airfield with tail rotor control failure and landed it without harm to its crew and its complement of black soldiers. As has been seen, Flight Lieutenant Victor Cook was able to land his Alouette even after its tail rotor drive shaft had been severed. The impression must not be given, however, that the Alouette was invulnerable because a hit in the engine or the main rotor gear box could be fatal.<sup>7</sup>

Both versions of the Alouette III were bought by Rhodesia while finding favour in 68 other countries.<sup>8</sup> How many of each type Rhodesia possessed has not been revealed. Given international sanctions as a consequence of the unilateral declaration of independence by Ian Smith on 11 November 1965, clarity of records cannot be expected. It is known that :

- 3 were acquired in April 1962 (1 damaged beyond repair: on 17 January 1972)
- 2 in July 1962
- 3 (with hoists) in August 1963
- 4 in August 1968 (2 damaged beyond repair: on 1 July 1970 and 20 November 1973)
- 1 in April 1972 (1 damaged beyond repair: on 17 March 1977)
- 5 in December 1972
- 2 in January 1974
- 1 in July 1974
- 2 in January 1975
- 2 in March 1975
- 4 in June 1975 (1 shot down: on 18 May 1977)
- 1 in February 1977
- 5 date not known
- 3 in June 1979
- 12 date not known

There were many more helicopters brought down by fire from the ground than the above list indicates and many were re-built. In fact, all Alouettes are rebuilt totally in the course of their preventive maintenance cycle. The engine would be changed after 1 200 flying hours and the airframe after 3 600.<sup>9</sup> In the difficult times after 1965, many helicopters were built entirely from spares.<sup>10</sup>

This list gives a total of 50 Alouettes but how many were actually owned by Rhodesia and how many were on loan from South Africa is not clear.<sup>11</sup> At one stage, 27 South African helicopters were deployed in Rhodesia. Within No. 7 (helicopter) Squadron, the South African Alouettes were designated as belonging to *Alpha* Flight. In 1980, when Rhodesia had become Zimbabwe, the Air Force of Zimbabwe was left with eight Alouettes which gives some indication of its true strength. By deft evasion of the international sanctions and the consequent arms embargo, eleven Italian Agusta- Bell 205A (the Rhodesians called them, 'Cheetahs') were acquired in August 1978. The AB205A was the celebrated American 'Huey' of Vietnam fame built under licence in Italy with a range of 400 kilometres and a maximum speed of 126 miles per hour. It was designed to carry 11 passengers but because these particular AB205As were elderly, and after armour and twin .303 inch machine-guns had been fitted, they could transport eight troops. Thus they had a greater range and double the carrying capacity of the Alouettes. In 1979 the use of the 205As on external operations into neighbouring countries meant that the Fire Forces engaged in internal operations were not constantly robbed of their Alouette IIIs. This allowed the creation of large 'Jumbo' Fire Forces which contributed to the increased casualties inflicted on the insurgent forces.

The purchase and immediate fate of the Rhodesian AB205As before they arrived in Rhodesia is not clear. They came to Rhodesia via the Comoro Islands, a common route for embargoed items. It is believed that thirteen AB205As were ordered from Agusta in Italy by a customer in Kuwait. They were delivered by ship in Beirut, were unloaded and moved to Kaslik, a Maronite suburb of Beirut. Then they were bartered for arms from Israel for Major Haddad's Christian militia in southern Lebanon. The Rhodesians were led to believe that they had purchased new aircraft but the AB205As they received were beyond their safe flying life. With vital parts corroded, the Rhodesians had a major task in restoring the aircraft to a flying condition. Early in their operational life, one AB205A was lost when its

tail rotor sheared on 12 February 1979 but otherwise they were to make a significant contribution to the counter-insurgency operations.

The importance of helicopters to Rhodesia was such that, when its counter-insurgency war was at its height, No. 7 Squadron was the largest squadron in the world with 40 Rhodesian pilots and some 20 seconded South African Air Force pilots, flying 45 aircraft. Pilots served three year tours on the different aircraft types of the Rhodesian Air Force. When, because of political pressures, South African pilots were withdrawn, the loss was made up by seconding senior qualified personnel from headquarters (after a five-hour refamiliarisation course) and by calling up former pilots who had returned to civilian life. The Rhodesian Air Force might have been of excellent quality but it was always the smallest of the Rhodesian units. Its greatest strength in the 1970s was only ever 2 300 personnel (150 of them pilots) and including the General Service Unit which was deployed to guard its installations.

The birth of Rhodesia's air force was unintentional. In the mid-thirties, when the re-emergence of a German threat to peace caused nations to re-examine their defences, the members of the Legislative Assembly of Southern Rhodesia did likewise. In a gesture of loyalty, they offered Britain £10 000 for the Royal Navy to strengthen imperial defence. They were not expecting the British to respond with the suggestion that Southern Rhodesia should establish an air training unit. This illustrated the unique position of the Colony of Southern Rhodesia in the British Empire because, not only was she self-governing, but she had the right to defend herself despite not having the status of a dominion and therefore sovereignty. As external threats hardly existed, defence was left to the only regular force in the colony, the British South Africa Police (BSAP), reinforced by the part-time white territorials of the Rhodesia Regiment and district rifle platoons.

The air training unit, placed under command of the Rhodesia Regiment, sent the first six trainee pilots for instruction at the local flying school run by the de Havilland Company at Belvedere Airport, Salisbury [now Harare], in November 1935. They trained on Wednesday afternoons and weekends in Gipsy Moths and Tiger Moths. By 1937-1939 the unit had a new airfield, at Cranborne in the southern outskirts of Salisbury, and 15 biplanes - six Hawker Hart bombers, six Hawker Audaxes two-seat army co-operation aircraft and three Gloster Gauntlet single seat fighters.

The imminence of war led to the mobilisation of the Air Unit and on 28 August 1939, Southern Rhodesia was the first in the British Empire to send her servicemen abroad. Two flights of Harts and Audaxes took off for Kenya to replace No. 233 Squadron of the Royal Air Force which had departed for the Sudan. Again Southern Rhodesia had demonstrated her loyalty to Britain and would remind Britain of this when relations soured twenty years later.

On 19 September 1939 the Air Unit was renamed the Southern Rhodesian Air Force with its three flights in Kenya becoming No. 1 Squadron. Southern Rhodesia also formed the Rhodesian Air Training Group to train British aircrew under the Empire Training Scheme, building training establishments outside Salisbury, Bulawayo and Gwelo [now Gweru], which produced 2 000 pilots and 300 navigators for the Royal Air Force.

In 1939 the 69 000 whites in Southern Rhodesia were able to spare 10 000 men and women for war. To avoid devastating casualties, major Rhodesian units, with the exception of the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR), were not sent abroad. Instead Rhodesians were seconded to the South African and British services. On 22 April 1940, No. 1 Squadron of the Southern Rhodesian Air Force was absorbed by the Royal Air Force as No. 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron. Two other Royal Air Force squadrons, No. 266 and No. 44 had 'Rhodesia' added to their titles. 977 Rhodesian officers and 1 432 airmen served in the Royal Air Force with 579 becoming casualties and of those 498 died. Rhodesian airmen won 256 medals. One member of No. 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron was Ian Douglas Smith, later the Prime Minister.

The end of the war and demobilisation left Southern Rhodesia with only two regular defence units, the

RAR and the Permanent Staff Corps, which supplied the instructors for the compulsory territorial service which young white males underwent in the Rhodesia Regiment, attending short camps and weekend parades. Within the Staff Corps, however, there were airmen fresh from war, and their enthusiasm led to the revival of the air unit and, then, in 1947, to the re-establishment of the Southern Rhodesian Air Force (SRAF). Its strength was 69 officers and men, flying North American Harvard advanced trainers acquired from the South African Air Force and the Royal Air Force. In 1948 Field Marshal Smuts, the Prime Minister of South Africa, donated a Douglas C47 Dakota. In 1951 twenty-two Supermarine Spitfire Mark XXIIIs were acquired to be flown by short-service officers and part-time pilots. In 1952-1953 the SRAF entered the jet age, re-equipping with sixteen Vampire FB9 fighter-bombers, sixteen Vampire T11 jet-trainers and sixteen Percival Provost piston-engined basic trainers.

Again the money for these aircraft had come from a loyal gesture. The Imperial defence authorities had informed the Southern Rhodesian Government that, without jet aircraft, the SRAF was useless for defence of the Empire and should be disbanded. Southern Rhodesia was, as ever, short of money, so the long-serving Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister, Sir Godfrey Huggins, turned for help to his future partner in the coming Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Roy Welensky, the Leader of the Unofficial Members in the Northern Rhodesian Legislative Council. Not wanting to lose the SRAF and knowing that re-equipment was inevitable once the Federation was in being, Welensky persuaded the Northern Rhodesian Government to meet the bill of £200 000.<sup>12</sup>

The British sanction of the formation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland - an unlikely marriage of a self-governing colony with two protectorates - was the product of a sustained campaign by Roy Welensky and Godfrey Huggins, both of whom hoped to create a great British dominion north of the Limpopo. Although the Federation did not gain sovereign status, it inherited Southern Rhodesia's right of defence and took over the SRAF and the army units of the three territories. The Queen granted the title 'Royal Rhodesian Air Force' (RRAF) and khaki army uniforms and rank structures were exchanged for British style Air Force blues and ranks.

In 1956 the RRAF comprised No. 1 and No. 2 Vampire squadrons; No. 3 transport squadron, with eight C47 Dakotas and two Percival Pembroke light transports; and No. 4 training squadron, with Provosts. The air station at Thornhill was acquired from the departing Royal Air Force and was modernised. The Federation undertook to supply infantry and air force reinforcements to the British Middle East Command as its contribution to Commonwealth defence. Consequently in 1959 it bought four Canadair C4 transports<sup>13</sup> and fifteen English Electric Canberra B2 light bombers. In 1958, the Vampire squadrons helped the Royal Air Force deal with dissident tribesmen in the Aden Protectorate. In 1961 Rhodesian transport aircraft supported British forces in the Kuwait crisis and dropped food in a flood-relief operation in Kenya. In 1959-1963 the Canberra squadrons regularly reinforced the Royal Air Force in Cyprus. In 1963 the front-line strength was enhanced when No. 1 Squadron re-equipped with twelve Hawker Hunter FGA9 ground attack fighters. The RRAF remained small but justly proud of its efficiency. While the Royal Air Force needed a ratio of 300 men per jet aircraft, the Rhodesians could achieve a better rate of serviceability with only 30 men per aircraft.<sup>14</sup>

The role of the RRAF by then was not an entirely external one. From 1956 onwards the Federal forces began to concentrate on internal security operations. In response to awakening African rejection of white rule and the British and French retreat from empire, the RRAF formed No. 6 Squadron, equipped with Provosts, for an internal security role.

There were clear signs of strengthening African nationalism in all three territories of the Federation. In 1957 there were riots in an African township in Salisbury. In 1958 Dr Hastings Banda returned from abroad to lead the African resistance in Nyasaland and would by 1962 convince the British that the Federation could not endure and that Nyasaland had to secede. Applying equal pressure was Kenneth Kaunda in Northern Rhodesia. After 1957 the African nationalists in Southern Rhodesia, with Joshua Nkomo taking a prominent role, became more militant. In February 1959 the RRAF's No. 3 Squadron flew troops from Southern Rhodesia to quell unrest in Nyasaland. RRAF Provosts flew in support of

the police and troops, dispersing crowds with air-delivered tear gas canisters, dropping leaflets and undertaking reconnaissance. Vampire jets flew 'showing the flag' flights as did the new Canberra bombers. Belgium's sudden decision in 1960 to withdraw from the Congo, creating Zaïre, brought mutinies, insurrection and the Katanga crisis. The Federal Army was deployed to the Northern Rhodesia northern border while the RRAF protected Federal airspace and flew out of the Congo over 2 000 whites refugees, fleeing the violence.

Experience in Nyasaland highlighted the need for rapid reinforcement of troops. The feasibility of the use of paratroops was examined in March 1960 when the RRAF adapted Dakota aircraft for tests.<sup>15</sup> The acquisition of helicopters was considered but the contemporary helicopters were useless in the Federation's 'hot and high' conditions. The Alouette III helicopter was not yet available.

Then, on 9 May 1960, in a review of Imperial defence, the Chief of Imperial General Staff, Lord Louis Mountbatten, suggested to Welensky (then the Federal Prime Minister) that the Federal contribution should be reduced from an infantry brigade to a squadron of SAS parachute-trained special forces, providing the Federal Army with its paratroops. The mutinies of black soldiers in the Congo in the next month encouraged the Federal Government to establish white professional army units - C Squadron of the SAS, the First Battalion of the Rhodesian Light Infantry (IRLI) and an armoured car squadron - as insurance.<sup>16</sup> The territorial army was expanded, with reserve battalions increasing the number of the Rhodesia Regiment battalions to ten. The BSAP recruited a police reserve of 30 000 whites and blacks. The RRAF formed a parachute school to train the SAS and created the Volunteer Reserve to tap the skills of the civilian population. It ordered Alouette III helicopters, choosing them not only because they suited local conditions, but because their price suited the Federal Treasury. The Alouette III was also the choice of the South African Air Force which meant that training facilities and expertise could be shared. The Portuguese Air Force had also purchased Alouette IIIs and would be the first to use them with French 20mm cannons.

This strengthening of forces was also in response to the increasing African nationalist sponsored unrest in all the territories and in Southern Rhodesia in particular. The emergence of the militant Youth League in 1957 gave black resistance a new edge. In February 1959 the Southern Rhodesian Government responded with a state of emergency, designed to crush resistance quickly so that troops could be released to deal with Banda in Nyasaland. By then the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, had decided to speed up the decolonisation process dramatically and seek Britain's future in Europe. Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia were moved rapidly towards independence while in 1961 Southern Rhodesia was given a new constitution, designed to give blacks an enhanced political role and eventual domination. The Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister, Sir Edgar Whitehead, had in fact been seeking quasi-dominion status but the British Government was in no mood to give the whites - less than five per cent of the population - perpetual political domination. If Southern Rhodesia were to become an independent sovereign nation, she had to accept rule by the majority. While this was rejected by the whites, it encouraged black resistance. The National Democratic Party demanded power and persuaded its leader, Joshua Nkomo, to reject the new constitution.

Whitehead attempted to meet black aspirations with a number of reforms of racial legislation but when he threatened to deal with the fundamental black grievance, that of the unequal racial allocation of land, the white electorate ousted him in the general election of 1962. He was succeeded by the Rhodesian Front led by Winston Field who promised not to tamper with land tenure and to secure independence at the demise of the Federation in the next year. Field did not deal with the land issue and he failed to secure independence. His party replaced him in 1963 with Ian Smith. British intransigence on the independence issue led Smith to declare Rhodesia independent on 11 November 1965.

Black resistance in Southern Rhodesia had led Whitehead to strengthen the police force, to ban the National Democratic Party (only to see it replaced instantly by the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU)) and to introduce security legislation. The African nationalists countered with urban unrest - riots, strikes and the like. The favoured weapon was the petrol bomb aimed mostly at blacks

collaborating with the whites. In addition, in 1962, the African nationalists decided on an armed struggle and sent young men for training in Ghana, Tanganyika and at insurgency warfare schools in Russia and its satellite countries. Also in 1962 the police began to uncover arms caches. Over a thousand African nationalist supporters were arrested and Whitehead banned ZAPU. African nationalists set fire to forests at Chipinga on the eastern border and the SAS parachuted in to deal with them.

Thus the war of liberation, known as the '*Chimurenga*', began in late 1962. The pattern of urban violence continued for a year or more and then fizzled out because of good police work and the effectiveness of the law. The African nationalists split into two factions, the ZAPU led by Nkomo, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) led by the Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole (later to be ousted by Robert Mugabe), and established themselves in sympathetic Zambia across the Zambezi. From there, from 1966 onwards, they sent men into Rhodesia to foster rebellion in the urban and rural areas. The towns remained unco-operative but the rural areas began to harbour the insurgents in 1972 when the success of FRELIMO rebels in Mozambique provided the Rhodesian African nationalists with safe havens and supplies close to the border.

Internal security was a responsibility of the police who were assisted by the Army and the RRAF. The new No. 7 Squadron, equipped with the Aérospatiale SA316B Alouette IIIs, was able to insert personnel quickly to precise points and rescue the stranded and the injured. Three Alouettes arrived in April 1962, two in July and three in August 1963. As soon as the first two pilots, trained in France and South Africa, were on strength, they were sent to fly over the townships, dropping leaflets and tear-gas grenades on rioting crowds (only rarely), 'sky shouting', acting as airborne and command posts, and generally assisting the police. As pilots only have time to listen to snappy, brief transmissions, the police and army were forced to revise their ponderous radio procedures.

In the division of assets at the break-up of the Federation in 1963 the RRAF was returned to Southern Rhodesia with all its aircraft except for three transport aircraft which were given to Zambia. By then the RRAF had 1 200 regulars including a General Service Unit of black soldiers for guard and transport duties. Some adjustments were made. The Argonauts were sold and No. 6 Squadron (then a Canberra squadron) was disbanded and its aircraft went into storage.

At the time of UDI in 1965 the RRAF had concentrated at two bases - New Sarum near Salisbury and Thornhill near Gwelo.

New Sarum housed the administration, the photographic and the air movements sections, the aircrew selection centre, the apprentice training school and the parachute training section. Its air units were No. 3 Squadron (transport), No. 5 (bomber) with Canberras and No. 7 Squadron (helicopter) with Alouettes.

Thornhill had No. 1 Squadron (fighter) with Hunters, No. 2 Squadron (fighter) with Vampire FB9s and No. 4 Squadron (flying training) with Provosts. The trainees first flew Provosts and then Vampire T11s before flying the Vampire FB9s on armament training.

Thereafter all pilots rotated through the squadrons, learning to fly a variety of the aircraft on strength. This gave the RRAF pilots considerable versatility. They would serve tours on helicopters, ground attack aircraft, fighters, or transports before becoming instructors.<sup>17</sup> The types they flew depended on the pilot's nature. The more sedate pilots would fly transports and the Canberra bombers while the more aggressive would be posted to the fighters. Pilots would serve two tours with the squadrons before they were posted on their instructors courses, flying Provosts on basic flying training for a year or two before going on to jet instruction or taking up instructors' posts with the squadrons.<sup>18</sup>

Facing little external threat, the first challenge facing the RRAF (which in 1970 would drop 'Royal' from its title when Rhodesia became a republic) was how to procure spares and aircraft in defiance of international sanctions. This was met with ingenuity and subterfuge. The jet engines were a particular challenge as, prior to 1965, they had been sent to Rolls Royce in Britain for servicing. The Unilateral



Declaration of Independence on 11 November 1965 prompted the British to seize fourteen Avon engines being serviced for the Rhodesian Hunters and Canberras. This loss forced the Rhodesian Air Force technicians to service and maintain the remainder of their engines and equipment themselves with the help of local industry. After 70 starts, the starter motors for the Hunters had previously been sent back to Rolls Royce for servicing at a cost of £14 000 per motor. The RRAF technicians taught themselves to strip down the starter motors and service them at a cost of 76 pence per unit! That nine of the twelve Hunters were still flying 16 years later was a measure of their success. Spares and weapons were secured through clandestine purchasing and local manufacture - including the production of a singularly lethal range of aircraft bombs - the *Frantan*, *Alpha* and *Golf*.<sup>19</sup>

While jet fighters and bombers could not be purchased and had to be repaired, it was possible to replace the light aircraft. In August 1967, No. 6 Squadron was revived to take over No. 4 Squadron's role of basic flying training with seven Provosts. No. 4 Squadron re-equipped with ten new Aermacchi AL60-B2Ls for the counter-insurgency role. Assembling them themselves, the Rhodesians called the AL60-B2Ls, 'Trojans' to confuse the outside world. In fact, 28 refurbished North American T28 'Trojans'<sup>20</sup> had been bought from France in 1966-1967 but the ship carrying them had turned back within sight of Cape Town when the United States Government threatened to revoke all manufacturing licences held by the French. In January 1976 the Aermacchi AL60-B2L Trojans were replaced by twenty-one Reims Cessna FTB 337G Lynxes, twin-boom, twin piston-engined light attack aircraft. In 1977 thirty-one SIAI Marchetti SF260 Genets were bought to replace the Provost trainers of No. 6 Squadron and to provide more light attack aircraft. In 1976 six Britten-Norman BN-A Islanders were obtained for No. 3 Squadron to join additional Dakotas, a Cessna 421A and a Beech 95 C-55 Baron. In 1978 a new Squadron, No. 8, was created to fly the eleven Agusta Bell 205A Cheetah helicopters.

Time caught up with the Canberras and the Vampires and they became dangerous to fly. A Canberra B2 was re-built from spare parts and the South Africans passed on surplus Vampire FB52s and T11s. In the mid-seventies, when the T11s were beyond repair, South Africa set up a flying school in Durban where young Rhodesians flew Impala jet trainers. In addition, when needed, the South Africans would reinforce the Rhodesian Canberra force with Canberra B12s of their own. The South African contribution included building two advanced airfields, capable of handling jet aircraft, at Wankie, just south of Victoria Falls, and at Fylde, near Hartley west of Salisbury. These bases were intended to provide for joint Rhodesian, South African and Portuguese defence. More important was South Africa's helicopters and crews. These were sent into Rhodesia in support of the South African Police units which served in Rhodesia between 1967-1975 or were seconded to the Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF) as *Alpha* Flight or were allowed to 'join' the RhAF for tours of duty. Some South African aircrew did tours as long as three years. When major cross-border operations were being mounted, such was the co-operation with the South African Air Force that the Rhodesians could field 50 helicopters.

The South African helicopter force was, however, a double-edged sword on occasions. The South African Prime Minister, B.J. Vorster, used it to apply political pressure on the Rhodesian Government. In 1976, for example, when he was seeking to coerce Ian Smith into accepting majority rule, Vorster withdrew 27 pilots on the pretext of protesting at the escalation of the Rhodesian war, represented by the raid by the Rhodesian Selous Scouts on an insurgent camp at Nyadzonya in Mozambique on 8 August. Vorster also cut off Rhodesia's supplies of ammunition and fuel, forcing Ian Smith to accept the settlement proposals offered to him in September by the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Once Smith's acceptance of majority rule had produced the first African dominated government, that of Bishop Muzorewa, the South African support was liberally renewed with, amongst other aid, two South African-manned Fire Forces being established in the south of Matabeleland, with four South African Aérospatiale Pumas each. The troops were South African Parabats (paratroopers) with Rhodesian pilots and army personnel assisting.

When the RhAF required long-range transports for cross border operations it borrowed them from the commercial air line Air Trans Africa whose owner, Jack Malloch, was an officer in the Volunteer Reserve. Many vital spares were brought in by Malloch who ran a sustained exercise in the evasion of

sanctions. Other members of the Volunteer Reserve were used to staff forward airfields (FAFs) in the operational areas, established once the insurgency became a fact of life, to provide air support for the ground forces. Eventually there were nine such bases : FAF1 (Wankie); FAF2 (Kariba); FAF3 (Centenary); FAF4 (Mount Darwin); FAF5 (Mtoko); FAF6 (Chipinga); FAF7 (Buffalo Range); FAF8 (Grand Reef); and FAF9 (Rutenga). In addition, impromptu FAFs would be created as needed anywhere there was a 1 000 yard runway.

It was from the FAFs that the helicopters and aircraft assigned to 'Fire Force' operated. Thornhill and New Sarum provided facilities for major maintenance and repair but the helicopter units of four to six aircraft were mostly self-sufficient because each helicopter crew comprised a pilot and a qualified technician who maintained the aircraft as well as manning its machine-guns or 20mm cannon. The jet squadrons based at Thornhill and New Sarum, being in the centre of Rhodesia, were able to provide quick response anywhere when a target tough enough to need the attention of Hunters and Canberras presented itself.

The helicopter has unique features to offer the military. Under anything but truly abnormal conditions, helicopters can ascend or descend at steep angles, allowing them to operate from confined and unimproved areas such as forest clearings, narrow valleys etc.

Although the French had designed the Alouette II and III as purely clear weather daylight machines and therefore had not fitted the necessary night flying equipment, the Rhodesian pilots would fly at night if they could see the horizon. Their take-offs and landings required only minimum illumination. The ability of the helicopter to fly at high or low altitudes and to decelerate rapidly, combined with the capacity for slow forward speed and vertical landing, allows it to be flown under marginal weather conditions. The insistence on a minimum horizon was the product of an accident which killed Air Lieutenant G. Munton-Jackson and his technician, Flight Sergeant P.J. Garden, on 17 January 1972. Prior to that, pilots had flown in the dark, virtually without instruments - the French had fitted an E2A as the principal compass. In other aircraft, the E2A was a standby device. The lack of direction finding equipment had led to Peter Petter-Bowyer in 1969, when flying a load of ammunition and weapons before dawn from Thornhill, Gwelo, to Binga, on the Zambezi River, to stray north west into Zambia. Low on fuel and lost, Petter-Bowyer landed next to a farm, near Livingstone, to ask where he was. An African enlightened him but did not tell him that he had landed next to ZAPU's base at 'Freedom Farm'. This Petter-Bowyer did not discover until he had landed back in Rhodesia at the Victoria Falls and was told so by Air Vice-Marshal Harold Hawkins, the Commander of the Air Force. The net result was that the Alouettes were fitted with Becker radio direction finders. Munton-Jackson was flying one of a pair of Alouette IIIs en route from New Sarum, Salisbury, to Thornhill. The Alouettes were caught in a heavy thunder storm and an attempt was made to bring them in on a radar approach. One Alouette succeeded but Munton-Jackson crashed. It was not known whether he became disorientated but it was decided that henceforth the helicopters would only fly when a horizon could be discerned. The pressure of the war would lead to that ruling often being ignored. In the interests of safety, the officers commanding No 7 Squadron made every effort to enforce the ruling but precedents had been set and it was difficult to convince the ground forces that a casualty evacuation or other such requirement was impossible because of the lack of a horizon. Pilots found themselves in difficult and invidious positions but, as the war progressed, they began to transgress the rule less and less. They were so often in danger that they could not be persuaded to take even greater risks.<sup>21</sup>

The wide speed range and high manoeuvrability at slow speeds enables helicopters to fly safely at low altitudes using hills and trees as cover. In low intensity warfare - where there are no front lines - the choice can be made of the most concealed line of approach to the enemy. The noise of the engines will alert him, but the reflection of the sound of low-flying helicopters can deceive him as to the direction being taken. Helicopters can achieve surprise through 'contour-flying' (flying just above the tree-tops, following the contours of the land). They can confuse by using 'dummy' deployments of infantry stop-

groups, and can, as the Rhodesians showed, employ a shock effect by putting down lethal fire. The Alouette III lacked the aerobatic capabilities of more modern helicopters. Nevertheless a Rhodesian Alouette, configured as a gunship or 'K-Car', flown by Charles Goatley, with Beaver Shaw manning the 20mm cannon, had the distinction of shooting down a Botswana Defence Force Islander on 9 August 1979.<sup>22</sup> This happened when Goatley was covering a recovery by helicopters of troops from an external operation against a Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) base at Francistown.<sup>23</sup>

Noise, however, was a constant problem in giving away the approach of an attacking force. On 5 February 1979, during Operation Dabchick, a raid on Mucheneze Camp across Rhodesia's south eastern border in Mozambique, the SAS call-sign watching the camp heard the approaching AB205A Cheetahs eight minutes before they arrived. The Rhodesians also often flew the noisy Aermacchi AL60-B2L Trojans ahead of the Fire Force to mask the whine of the helicopters. Peter Petter-Bowyer did this when leading Fire Force to camps which he had discovered through his aerial reconnaissance. On Operation Dingo in November 1977 a DC8 jet airliner was flown over ZANLA camps near Chimoio an hour before the airstrike which opened the attack on them. ZANLA were holding their muster parade, and, as expected, took cover at the sound of the DC8. They returned to the parade ground and did not disperse when they heard jet engines again because they assumed that the DC8 was returning. What they heard was the sound of Hunter ground attack fighters diving out of the sun and the approach of a small armada of Alouettes. Crucial factors with regard to masking noise were terrain and wind direction. An approaching Fire Force would plot its flight to the target with these in mind. In 1979 a Fire Force would fly from Centenary in a southerly half-circle - having to refuel on the way - to attack targets in the Sipolilo area in order to exploit a wind from the east to hide its approach. The warning given by the noise of aircraft led to Fire Force commanders asking the personnel on an OP to tell them when the aircraft could be heard. Usually the OP heard the aircraft when they were four minutes from the target and four minutes would give the insurgents time to run a kilometre and a half. Every minute wasted in finding them, allowed them to flee a further 500 metres. This meant that the orbit of the searching aircraft had to be widened continuously.

Given a controlled airspace, helicopters can be used to seize objectives which otherwise are out of reach of ground troops because of obstacles or enemy action. Helicopters permit the placement of firepower and troops virtually anywhere. For example, two Alouettes were deployed with a mortar team. One Alouette carried the tube and ammunition, and the other carried the crew. Once the mortar was in action, the second helicopter provided aerial spotting which produced hits on target often with third bomb fired. This was practised from 1971 onwards but was not widely used because the 20mm cannon of the K-Car gave the Fire Forces potent and instant fire power except when soft ground absorbed its shells. The helicopter crews were also used to observe and correct the fall of shot for the Rhodesian Field Artillery Regiment. Vic Cook did this at night, flying above Leopard Rock Hotel in the Vumba (on the eastern border of Rhodesia) and spotting for the 5.5 inch medium guns harassing Machipanda in Mozambique. The second shell hit the target.

As well as the rapid insertion of ground forces, helicopters can quickly retrieve troops, weapons and equipment from situations of danger or for rapid redeployment. With troop ladders, or close to the ground hovering, troops can be landed or recovered without the helicopter actually landing. Rhodesian Army units on external operations in neighbouring countries, like Mozambique, took to wearing special 'Pegasus' harnesses which afforded them 'hot extraction' literally from the grasp of a pursuing enemy. The Alouette would lower a trapeze bar, attached to the cargo sling and capable of carrying four troopers. The troopers would hook on and the Alouette would lift them away. Once out of range, the troopers would be put down on the ground and would board the aircraft. 'Hot extraction' could be an uncomfortable ride when the pilot, under fire, reduced height and might drag its human cargo through the trees. In most cases, however, the G-Car pilot would land quickly rather than hazarding men on the end of a rope. On occasion, a pair of Hunters would attack the enemy pursuers to distract them, to get their heads down, while the G-Car came rapidly into land. 'Hot extractions' were dreaded by the aircrews who regarded them as the most dangerous of their flying duties because they involved flying deep into hostile territory, some times refueling twice to reach their objective.

Helicopters can land troops in tactical formations, ready for immediate action. They offer the battlefield commander the flexibility to deploy troops and their logistical support over a wide area, enabling him to exploit a tactical situation. Although the Alouette III lacked the modern 'mast-mounted' sighting equipment which allows a helicopter to remain in a hull-down position, protected from enemy observation and ground fire, it could still stand-off and wait for the moment to use its firepower to optimum effect.

The ability to change the nature of the helicopter's load at short notice is a major asset. Cargo can be carried in an external sling and delivered to inaccessible spots. The Alouette in Rhodesia had a constant daily role of placing radio relay teams on high features, resupplying them and recovering them. Helicopters can bring back damaged and discarded equipment which otherwise would be abandoned or destroyed. The Rhodesian Alouettes and AB205As frequently brought back captured weapons from neighbouring territories. The ability to extract wounded from any terrain, meant that any wounded could be reached usually within an hour. This drastically reduced fatalities and boosted the morale of the ordinary soldier.

The helicopter, of course, has its limitations. It consumes fuel at a high rate which limits its range and ability to carry loads. The load carrying capacity decreases with increases in altitude, humidity and temperature. Thus helicopters tend to be short on payload on a given mission. The Rhodesians compensated for this by establishing aviation fuel dumps at district commissioners' camps, rural police stations and the like. They also sent forward fuel in trucks and tankers with the 'land-tail' convoy of reinforcements for a deployed Fire Force so that fuel would be on hand. The 'land-tail' would have to get to within ten minutes' flying time from the target to be of any assistance. If vehicles could not approach the area in time, Dakota aircraft would fly in fuel to the nearest airstrip or para-drop it close to the Fire Force target area. On external operations the Rhodesians would para-drop fuel into temporary administrative bases set up in remote areas of Zambia and Mozambique along the flight path of helicopters flying in troops and attacking external camps. In the case of the second phase of Operation Dingo in October 1977, two administrative bases were needed to allow the helicopters to reach Tembue camp in central Mozambique near the Malawi border. The personnel at these administrative bases had no easy task because the areas were full of trees and rocks among which the drums would land. There would be little time before the attacking helicopters would be returning to refuel and helicopters could not land near drums on pallets to which parachutes were still attached because of the danger of fatal entanglement. On Operation Mascot in 1978 the drums landed amongst a cluster of 'Buffalo Beans'. A stinging encounter with Buffalo beans is never forgotten.<sup>24</sup>

Weight and balance in a helicopter drastically affect the flight control and loads have to be carefully distributed. Poor weather conditions - hail, heavy rain et al - and winds in excess of 30 knots handicap helicopter operations. Crosswind velocities of 10-15 knots and downwind velocities above five knots will affect the selection of the direction of landing or take-off. Engine and rotor noise can alert the enemy, as has been said. It is more fatiguing for pilots to fly helicopters than fixed-wing aircraft. The helicopter is unstable and a loss of control for more than a few seconds spells disaster. The need to keep the right hand on the cyclic-pitch control column makes the holding of maps awkward. In the case of Rhodesia the helicopter crews, unlike other aircrew, faced danger every time they flew their daily tasks. This in itself was wearying. Helicopters require more maintenance than fixed-wing aircraft and have considerably less range. To reduce crew fatigue when refuelling in the bush, rolling drums and setting up pumps, the resourceful Peter Petter-Bowyer designed in 1968 a refuelling system based on a simple suction pipe using the Alouette's engine. This meant that the engine did not have to be switched off, relieving the crew with the problem of re-starting. Surprisingly, after 1972, the Rhodesian Air Force, however, adopted the South African practice of carrying a small petrol-driven two-stroke pump. This meant that high risk fuel had to be carried and the petrol was to catch fire on at least one occasion.<sup>25</sup>

While a transport aircraft can deploy 20 or more paratroops in a single drop, the Alouette and the AB205A helicopters can only bring in small groups. Transport aircraft, however, are less able to make a concealed approach, cannot land anywhere and do not have the flexibility of the helicopter which allows

quick modifications of its role to meet changing situations. The troop-carrying aircraft, of course, has a greater range but once its paratroops have been dropped, their quick recovery is difficult without helicopters to ferry them out. The Rhodesians, possessed of sufficient Douglas C47 Paradaks (Dakotas configured for paratrooping), used them in combination with heli-borne troops both on Fire Force operations and on external raids.

The Alouette in Rhodesia was mainly used to transport and fight with the army in Fire Force but it also had many other roles to play in countering the insurgency. Its use in police urban operations, led to all policemen being trained in correct procedures of boarding and leaving helicopters with full equipment. The Alouette inserted and supported the Special Urban Emergency Units 'SWAT teams' of the police, lowering them by its winch onto the roofs of buildings. In the rural areas, the helicopter's unique ability to fly at a reasonable speed close to the ground was exploited in tracking insurgents. Trained trackers could follow a track from the air which meant that the enemy could be quickly contacted. At the instigation of Peter Petter-Bowyer, dogs were trained to follow a scent while its handler followed it in a helicopter. Dogs with radios strapped onto their backs, allowed the helicopter to follow at a discreet distance until contact was made.<sup>26</sup> Dogs, of course, need a scent to follow and scents are based on moisture. In the dry, hot conditions of the Rhodesian veld, scents did not last long after 10 a.m., reducing the value of the tracker dog.

Aside from those aircraft allocated to the Fire Forces, individual or pairs of Alouette III G-Cars were positioned at times around the country to assist local efforts. They would be sent to Rutenga in the south east, to Inyanga barracks in the east or elsewhere. The pilots worked with the police and the Army units deployed in their area. They had routine but vital tasks such as resupplying the radio relay teams. They also assisted the ground troops by supporting trackers, picking up and flying stop groups into cut off positions when an enemy gang was being pursued. These pilots, working with few means, had to be remarkably ingenious. The success rate was never high but the disruptive effect was enormous as the pilot and their, often reservist, troops harried the enemy. Vic Cook recalled the constant use of 'dummy' drops to confuse the enemy as he tried to convince ZANLA gangs that they were surrounded when in reality he was moving four men at a time. And the gangs that a single helicopter could confront need not be small. Vic Cook found himself alone in the air on one occasion when tackling 85 heavily armed ZANLA on the eastern border. Led by John Barnes, flying a K-Car, Cook and Bill McQuaid, an American, had flown from Mtoko ([now Mutoko] north east of Salisbury) to deal with an incursion from Mozambique. The incursion had been discovered when security forces in the Inyanga North tribal area had detained African tribeswomen who had been feeding the ZANLA group. Barnes, Cook and McQuaid flew in without troops because the intention was to use the men of a territorial company of the Rhodesia Regiment which was in the area. To find the ZANLA, the tribeswomen were carried aloft to point out the enemy but nothing was seen. Eventually, the K-Car fired searching rounds into a wooded area and drew a murderous reply from the heavy 12.7mm machine-gun and other weapons of ZANLA. The K-Car was hit but continued to fire until its gun jammed. McQuaid's G-Car, flying close to the trees, was so severely damaged that he just managed to fly it over a nearby hill before putting it down. The K-Car returned to Mtoko, leaving Cook alone in a running fight of seven to eight hours. Cook used the terrain to advantage, popping up from behind ridges to fire on the ZANLA, drawing hot responses. He moved the territorial troops, in sticks of four, to cut off the enemy and late in the fight put all the MAG gunners in an ambush position. The Rhodesian effort was rewarded by the harried ZANLA deciding to retreat, abandoning their intention to attack Inyanga Village and later the Grand Reef Airport (outside Umtali (now Mutare)). Cook made so many hard landings, moving troops, that finally his left undercarriage axle broke. As the upper oleo strut, from which the wheel still hung, was banging against the helicopter's side, Cook's tech broke off a branch from a tree, over which Cook hovered, and wedged it into the broken mechanism to hold the broken undercarriage in place. Cook flew back to Mtoko but obviously could not land without crashing and damaging the aircraft. The ground crew built a mound of sandbags to support the G-Car, and Cook landed gently on it, ending a long day.

For a Fire Force to trap and eliminate ZANLA or ZIPRA insurgents, their whereabouts had to be discovered. This was accomplished by a variety of means. One method was the use of the 'road runner'

or a bugged portable commercial transistor radio receiver. The Rhodesian Special Branch left 'road runners' lying around in likely areas, or on the shelves of rural stores, so that the insurgents would pick them up and take them back to their unit. The 'road runners' were also supplied to double agents, such as the Reverend Kandareka (a close colleague of Bishop Muzorewa and supporter of ZANLA), who were providing the insurgent gangs in the field with supplies.<sup>27</sup> The 'Road Runner' contained a homing device which was activated by the radio being switched off and could be picked up by an aircraft's homing equipment. The sound of an aircraft would prompt the insurgents to switch off the radio, ironically, therefore transmitting their position to the aircraft. Once 'road runners' were known to be in an area, the RhAF would send up helicopter or a Lynx with a Becker radio direction finder to detect the signals. A second Lynx, flying on a parallel or opposing course would secure second co-ordinates. The criss-crossing of the direction finding of two aircraft would secure a likely area of a kilometre square into which a Fire Force would descend. Numerous insurgents were taken by surprise by the unheralded arrival of a Fire Force.<sup>28</sup> The lack of precision in target identification and the absence of an OP to talk the Fire Force on, however, meant that many would escape.<sup>29</sup>

Fire Forces would react to incidents - ambushes, farm attacks and the like - and would be called in when trackers or cross-graining patrols made contact with the enemy and called for reinforcement. As the Rhodesian Army patrols - regular or reservist - comprised sections of four men called 'sticks' (each stick possessing a VHF radio and an MAG machine-gun), it was of great comfort to know that reinforcement in the form of the formidable Fire Force was merely an hour's flying time away. Intelligence gathered by the police Special Branch, and other agencies, and by the fearsome Selous Scouts, through their pseudo-gang operations, often resulted in Fire Force action. Information would come from a Selous Scout detachment, disguised as ZANLA and 'operating' with them, that there would be a ZANLA meeting at a particular time and location. Fire Force would then arrive at the meeting. While Selous Scouts-generated information produced results, intelligence generally tended to be dated at least and too often produced 'lemons' i.e. Fire Force call-outs when the insurgents had already left the area or were never there.

An important method of detecting the insurgents was by aerial reconnaissance. By the early seventies a number of pilots, flying Provosts, Trojans, Cessna 185s and later Lynxes, became highly skilled at spotting 'crapping' patterns in the wilder parts. These pilots would pick up a series of radiating tracks, for example, from a dense clump of bush made by insurgents going about their daily functions. The level of success on reaction to these sightings and interpretations was satisfactorily high. As the Officer Commanding 4 Squadron, Peter Petter-Bowyer taught himself the telltale signs of human habitation in the bush and then passed them on to his pilots. The most skilled of these was Kevin 'Cocky' Benecke who was possessed of the most phenomenal eyesight and could see men on the ground under cover when others could not. The Air Force's Medical Officer, Doctor Brian Knight, discovered that Benecke had a minor visual defect in the green-brown range which enabled him to distinguish dark objects in shade which people with normal eyesight could not see. This meant that, when Benecke summoned Fire Force to a camp, it was occupied.<sup>30</sup>

Pseudo operations were combined with the practice of establishing OPs on hills which commanded significant terrain such as known infiltration routes, villages of sympathisers and the like. The purpose of the OP was to observe the pattern of life and detect anything out of the ordinary which might give away the presence of the insurgents. OPs would notice, for instance, an unusual amount of cooking taking place or lines of women carrying cooked food into groves of trees and other hiding places. The skilled OP operators were the Selous Scouts but all units were used on OPs with greater or lesser success. The problem of the OP was to remain undetected by the local population which took considerable skill at concealment. Once the OP was certain there was an insurgent presence, the commander of the OP would summon Fire Force. Success depended on the OP's skill at map reading so that he could direct Fire Force with precision to the target. Analysis by the Rhodesian Intelligence Corps (RIC) in early 1979 was to show that the highest ratio of success was achieved when Fire Force action was initiated by an OP as compared to the other means already discussed.<sup>31</sup>

The precursor to Fire Force operations, the first use of armed helicopters supporting ground forces on 28 April 1966, reached a level approaching farce but had important consequences. This engagement is now graced with the title of the 'Battle of Sinoia' and its date celebrated in Zimbabwe as a public holiday to mark the beginning of the '*Chimurenga* or War of Liberation'.<sup>32</sup>

On 3 April 1966 a well-led and disciplined unit of 20 armed members of ZANU had crossed the Zambezi near Chirundu from Zambia and moved southwards through the bush eventually marching down the power line to Salisbury from the Kariba hydro-electric dam. When the group reached the small town of Sinoia (now called Chinhoyi) it split up. Five ZANU left for Umtali (to blow up the oil pipeline and to attack white farmers), two for Fort Victoria, six for the Zwimba Tribal Trust Land and seven were destined for the Midlands. The main aim was to recruit local support for their cause. The various members of the ZANU unit were steadily killed or captured over the coming weeks, but not before they had murdered a white farmer, Johannes Viljoen, and his wife Johanna at Hartley (now called Chegutu) on 16 May 1966. The seven Midlands men based themselves near Red Mine on Hunyani Farm just north east of Sinoia to sabotage pylons and the like. Their training was deficient and they often inserted the detonator into the Russian TNT slabs in the wrong place, missing the primer, and simply blowing the slab to pieces.

These incidents brought Peter Petter-Bowyer, as the standby pilot (fresh from a conversion course to helicopters), to Sinoia in an Alouette III to support the police efforts to root out the gang. In charge of operations was Chief Superintendent John Cannon, DFC, the Officer Commanding the Police Lomagundi District and a former RAF bomber pilot of Second World War vintage. The ZANU group had sent one man on to Salisbury to make contact with the African nationalist politicians. However, the police had thoroughly penetrated ZANU and, in fact, this man reported to the police on 28 April, telling them the location of his comrades and their intention to change into black clothes and mount armed attacks on the white farmers near Sinoia. The informer explained that he would drive back to the gang early the next morning in a blue Peugeot.

Cannon and Petter-Bowyer suggested that the elimination of this gang was a task for the Army and that the Operations Co-ordinating Committee should be involved but the Police Commissioner, F.E. Barfoot, refused, saying that the police would handle the problem. Murray Hofmeyr was detailed to follow the police informer in an Alouette, flying at 11 000 feet through the early dawn of 28 April. Hofmeyr's aircraft had been hastily armed with an MAG machine-gun (equipped only with its iron infantry sights) mounted on an A frame at the left rear doorway. The informer said that he would rendezvous with his comrades just past the intersection of the main road with the old strip road to Sinoia, a kilometre before the bridge over the Hunyani River. The ZANU men would be hiding in the bush just to the left of the road, he said. Consequently, Cannon planned to spread his mixed force of forty police and farmers serving in the Police Reserve along the main and old roads and conduct a sweep and search operation in the triangle formed by the two roads and the Hunyani River. The police and reservists, clad in blue denim, were deployed, armed with venerable Lee Enfield .303 bolt-action rifles (hardly adequate against the five AK47s, one rocket launcher and one light machine-gun of the insurgents).<sup>33</sup>

Hofmeyr, however, then reported that the informer was turning off the main road on to the old strip road. The informer drove a hundred metres, stopped and strode off into the bush to the left. This meant that the seven ZANU were outside the triangle. Cannon responded by hastily deploying half his men in a line from the main road to the Kariba power line which ran parallel to the main road some distance to the south. He placed the other half along the powerline as a stop line. The first group began to advance parallel to the old road towards the last sighting. The helicopters circled above.

Realising that he could not command the operation from the ground, Cannon handed over control to Peter Petter-Bowyer who took off with four policemen in his Alouette. The police in the sweep lines, however, could not communicate with the helicopters because they did not have compatible radios. Thus the helicopter pilots had to land to direct the sweep lines. In the south western corner, where the two police lines started to converge, Pilot Officer David Becks had to do so to prevent them shooting each

other.

Flying in the vicinity of the last sighting, between the old road and the power line, Petter-Bowyer noticed what seemed to be a policeman standing under a tree. Petter-Bowyer, lacking intercomm, shouted to his passengers, pointing out the figure under the tree, but was horrified when one of his policemen opened fire out of the aircraft's window, his Sterling 9mm bullets passing through the spinning tilted blades. The enraged Petter-Bowyer landed his passengers on the road before resuming his patrol over the area.

Near the river a figure in a white shirt opened fire on Petter-Bowyer, who, having never been shot at before, was somewhat outraged. Flying on a right hand orbit, Petter-Bowyer called in Hofmeyr to use his MAG. However, due to inexperience, Petter-Bowyer did not realise that Hofmeyr was circling left to allow his gun to engage and was on a collision course with him. Petter-Bowyer first saw the man on the ground running with dust spurting around him, then Hofmeyr's incoming shadow. Petter-Bowyer broke away. It took Hofmeyr's technician, George Carmichael, 147 rounds, fired in four bursts, to bring down the running insurgent just south of the powerline. Such expenditure, Air Force Headquarters later ruled, was intolerable. In fact, given the lack of proper sights for deflection shooting, the amount of rounds fired was modest.

Traversing the ground, Petter-Bowyer next spotted two figures in the bush off the old road but before he could do them any harm, they looked up and he saw their white faces. He waved them back to the road. They were Detective Inspectors Bill Freeman and 'Dusty' Binns who had driven up the road and plunged into the bush ahead of the sweep line, anxious not to miss the fun.

Another pair to join the fun was Major Billy Conn of the RLI and his sergeant who had driven through Sinoia from Kariba and had come upon the helicopters and the armed police. Conn turned round and drove straight to the Police Station to volunteer his services to his friend John Cannon. Cannon readily agreed and Conn drove out along the main road and turned onto the strip road, arriving just as the advancing sweep line from the east shot and killed an insurgent. The sight of a dead ZANU drew the inexperienced police forward to cluster around the body. Conn shouted at them to disperse and as he did two ZANU rose out of the nearby grass and bush, one aiming his rifle. Conn opened fire killing both. The second had been in the act of throwing a grenade which then exploded. The chastened sweep line continued and eventually eliminated the remaining four insurgents.<sup>34</sup> Petter-Bowyer was awarded the Military Forces Commendation for his coolness under fire and for his control of the operation.<sup>35</sup>

This incident had profound effects. The anger of the army at being excluded led to future operations being planned and handled by all arms of the security forces, controlled by Joint Operations Centres (JOCs) on which all services were represented. The gathering and use of intelligence was centralised with the Special Branch reporting to the Central Intelligence Organisation. In March 1977 all operations came under a single commander, Lieutenant General Peter Walls, as Commander, Combined Operations.<sup>36</sup> Dissatisfaction with his own unpreparedness, led Petter-Bowyer, when an instructor, to train his men to fly with maximum weight. He also stressed the need for map reading skills. The Air Force came to demand that its pilots be capable of reading maps so well that they could navigate with a margin of error of 50 metres to find their target.

After 1966, helicopters were armed, on occasions, with 7.62mm MAGs, but, until 1973, were expressly forbidden to engage insurgents in a 'gunship' role. International sanctions meant that it was impossible to replace a Hunter fighter, for example, and it was very difficult to secure new helicopters to replace any which were shot down. To conserve the eight the air force possessed, their operations were limited to support and not offensive roles.<sup>37</sup> In this early period the helicopters were treated as such precious objects that the Rhodesian Army liked to believe that the RhAF would only allow their men on board with clean boots. Certainly all weapons had to be cleared and all magazines removed. The pressure of war would bring relaxation of such rules to such an extent that a black RAR soldier boarded a helicopter at Marymount Mission in the north-east with a Zulu rifle grenade still mounted on the muzzle of his rifle



and accidentally discharged the grenade through the roof of the Alouette.<sup>38</sup>

When the war intensified from December 1972, and white farmhouses were attacked in north-eastern Rhodesia, there was a need for a quick reaction force and helicopters obviously offered the quickest and most effective method of deploying one. It was apparent that a helicopter gunship could drastically aid the rapid elimination of the enemy. In February 1974 a dedicated Alouette III gunship, the K-Car, was ready for trials. Its rearseats had been replaced with an armoured seat for the gunner positioned to fire a Matra MG 151 20mm cannon out of the rear port doorway. The cannon was mounted on a French manufactured special floor fitting to cater for its weight and recoil. Trials on the Inkomo Range in March, May and June led to further modifications including the practice of removing the yaw pedals when trooping. In September 1974 K-Cars were fitted with anti-STRELA [the Russian SAM7] shrouds on their engines and were given matt paint finish.<sup>39</sup> The K-Car was ready.

Like the German MGFF and MG151 20mm cannons mounted in the Messerschmidt 109 and Focke-Wulf 190 fighters, the Matra MG 151 cannon fired a shell with a short cartridge which contained less than normal propellant. This reduced the recoil of the gun, making it suitable for the Alouette. The muzzle velocity was low and the rate of fire was slow. To allow deflection shooting the gun was equipped with a Collimateur reflector gun sight which was calibrated for the cannon to be fired at 90 degrees to the fore and aft axis at an altitude 800 feet from an Alouette travelling at 65 knots. The guns were initially obtained from the Portuguese and for a long time so was the high explosive incendiary (HEI) rounds used in Rhodesia. The rounds were expensive - 35 Rhodesian dollars each - and difficult to obtain. Ammunition also added weight to the helicopter, affecting its range. Thus the cyclic rate was adjusted downwards to 350 rounds per minute. The gunners fired bursts of three rounds or less and would regard themselves as off form if more than five rounds were expended per enemy killed. A good gunner would be able to fire accurately at lower heights and indeed some preferred 600 feet. The cannons were equipped with trays which took 200 or 400 rounds. The HEI rounds were highly effective except when fired on soft ground which negated their explosive effect because the shells had to decelerate sharply for their inertial fuses to be activated. Gunners would look for rocks or hard ground to fire at to maximise the effect of the shrapnel. In Fire Force contacts a high proportion of the enemy were killed and wounded as a result of 20mm fire. As the 20mm HEI was prone to explode harmlessly on contact with trees, the technician/gunners took to loading ball rounds on a ratio of one ball : five HEI shells.

To solve the problem of soft ground and trees, other guns were tried. Twin Browning .5 inch heavy machine-guns were fitted but were abandoned because of the weight factor and because the .5 bullet was not a cannon shell so a direct hit had to be scored which could be achieved with the lighter .303 round. Later, 1979, some K-Cars were equipped with four Mk 2 .303 Browning machine-guns which were slaved to a remote hand operated sighting and hydraulic driver system code-named of 'Kat-oog' [Cat's eye]. Out of this project would come a highly successful helmet sight. Peter Petter-Bowyer, as Staff Officer (Planning), was involved in this development at the CSIR in South Africa - called the *Dalmation Project* - and brought it back to Rhodesia to test it in the field in 1978. Ted Lunt flew the Dalmation fit helicopter while Petter-Bowyer found him targets, using his skills as a recce pilot. So successful was this combination that in the first week of trials 31 ZANLA insurgents were killed. Petter-Bowyer and Lunt would attack the target and then call Fire Force to get troops on the ground to complete the operation.<sup>40</sup> The four gun fit was mostly used in the role of a second K-Car. The Dalmation K-Cars flew at tree top height and, with .303 ammunition freely available and with each gun firing at a cyclic rate of 1 150 rounds a minute, achieved devastating results in 1979. The Dalmation K-Cars were used to drive the enemy into the open where they became targets for the 20mm.

Until 1976, as has been said, the troop-carrying Rhodesian G-Car Alouettes were armed with single 7.62mm MAGs and the South African G-Cars with single Mk 2 .303 Brownings. The arming of the G-Car went back to September-October 1965 when investigations began into the feasibility of mounting the FN 7.62mm MAG. This was done and the weapon was evaluated in early November. Modifications to the standard Army weapon were minimal. The bipod and the wooden butt were removed. The rear

buffer spring housing was padded and a short wooden handle projecting to the left of the weapon was added. The normal aperture sight was retained. The results of the trials were not spectacular. Modifications to the sighting system progressed to a wire ring and bead sight to the GM2 Reflector Gunsight, and finally to the Collimateur Lightweight Reflector Sight which was used thereafter. The MAG mounting progressed from a simple post to a fitting which accommodated the spent cartridge cases and ammunition belts and which limited the weapon's travel to prevent accidental damage to the aircraft. The weapon was fitted with a padded chest plate and twin handgrips to improve the handling and steadiness of aim. None of these modifications had taken place when Murray Hofmeyr took an armed G-Car into the first incident at Sinoia in April 1966. That incident led to the formal training of helicopter technicians as air-gunners.<sup>41</sup> Because the drag on the belts reduced the cyclic rate of fire of the MAGs to 400 rounds a minute, the Rhodesian G-Cars were re-armed with the faster firing Mk 2 .303 Brownings on twin mountings in 1976. The G-Cars carried 500 rounds per gun.<sup>42</sup> When the South African Pumas were deployed, they were armed with twin side-firing .5 or .303 inch Brownings.<sup>43</sup>

The K-Car was also used as a mobile command post to allow the commander of the heli-borne troops to direct their operations from the air above them. Thus radio equipment and a specially adapted rearward-facing chair next to the pilot's were provided. The army Fire Force commander was in overall charge but the K-Car pilot, usually the most senior pilot in the unit, would direct the air operations. Their roles being equally important for success but in many cases the experienced pilots would dominate and sometimes control the entire operation. The pilot's defined responsibilities were : to transport the Fire Force troops to the target; mark the target (with the gunner throwing out the smoke grenade); direct the landing of the troop-carrying helicopters (the G-Cars) and the dropping of paratroops where the Fire Force commander indicated (sometimes delegating the talk-in of the Dakota to the first immediately available G-Car); bring in and direct airstrikes; send aircraft away for reinforcements and refuelling; and control the recovery of troops, equipment and dead and captured enemy. Occasions, seasoned pilots were flying with inexperienced or incompetent Fire Force commanders and therefore would have more influence than the theory would allow.

The combinations of aircraft of the Fire Forces varied widely with what aircraft were available. Before the arrival of the AB205As, the Fire Forces were constantly stripped of their helicopters to support external operations by the SAS and other units. This meant that Fire Forces might be reduced for some days to a K-Car and a G-Car, using the G-Car to ferry in troops. The delays occasioned by this robbed the Fire Force of any effectiveness. The Rhodesian Intelligence Corps study in 1979 concluded that the most successful combination was a K-Car, four G-Cars (each carrying four troopers) reinforced by a Dakota (modified for paratrooping and carrying 16 paratroops) and a Lynx for light air strike (with 63mm SNEB rockets, mini-Golf bombs [blast and shrapnel], napalm, and twin .303 inch machine-guns mounted above the wing). As contact was made typically with 6 to 12 ZANLA, this force level of 32 gave the Fire Force a three to one ratio of superiority on the ground. The Fire Force quickly yielded an 80 to 1 kill rate by trapping the enemy gangs and eliminating them by air and ground fire.

This is not to say that the enemy did not fight back and with some ingenuity. For example, in failing light at 5.20 p.m. on 17 August 1976, Support Commando, 1RLI, commanded by Major [later Lieutenant Colonel] P.W. Armstrong, contacted 20-30 ZANLA who had set up an 'aircraft ambush' near Mount Darwin in the north east of Rhodesia. Aside from their normal small arms, the ZANLA had positioned in the trap a 75mm recoilless rifle, a 7.62mm machine gun with an anti-aircraft sight and 60mm and 82mm mortars. In addition they had buried six electrically-fired anti-aircraft booby traps, comprising TNT buried a foot deep in the earth on top of which was placed 8-10 stick grenades. The ZANLA planned to draw a Fire Force into the trap. In the event a Lynx, supporting a stick of men pursuing a body of ZANLA, took the bait. The Lynx put in an airstrike and was badly damaged by fire from the ground and by the explosion of three booby traps. The ZANLA split into small groups and awaited the arrival of the Fire Force. The Fire Force was deployed without waiting for the K-Car which had to be summoned back from a trip to Salisbury. Stops were put down but nothing transpired until, in the fast fading light, the K-Car arrived and drew heavy fire. The stops swept forward and, although they

only found an abandoned machine-gun, they were subjected to mortar, rifle and machine gun fire from a long range. Corporal Crittal was slightly wounded in the leg by the mortar fire and Corporal Titlestad was mortally wounded aboard a helicopter. There were no ZANLA casualties until in the night two of them were wounded and captured, and one was killed in an ambush by Two Independent Company of the Rhodesia Regiment.<sup>44</sup>

The G-Cars would make dummy landings to confuse the enemy, while placing men in cut-off or stop positions. The G-Cars were then on hand for quick evacuation of casualties or the re-positioning of troops. The G-Cars thereafter would be sent back to base or to rendezvous with a 'land-tail' of vehicles bringing forward reinforcements, fuel and ammunition [20mm, .303 inch, 7.62mm for the helicopters and the troops; grenades; flares and bunker bombs and tear gas for the clearing of caves]. The G-Cars would fire their machine-guns when a target presented itself, would fire to pin down escaping enemy, or flush out insurgents from thick cover. The K-Car pilot would always keep at least one G-Car orbiting on the periphery of the battle to be able to move stops quickly, to extricate casualties, to assess a dropping zone and, perhaps, to talk in the Paradak. This G-Car would act as a reserve command post if the K-Car had to transfer the Fire Force commander and depart for fuel. While few helicopters were shot down (considering the numerous daily call-outs) many were hit by ground-fire and a number of Fire Force commanders and aircrew were killed and wounded as they orbited at 800 feet, directing the action on the ground.<sup>45</sup>

Deployed in January 1974, the Fire Force enjoyed its first action a month later, on 24 February, after being called in by Lieutenant Dale Collett of the Selous Scouts.<sup>46</sup> Stunningly successful from the outset, Fire Force went through three phases of development : Phase One - 1974-1976; Phase Two - 1977-1979; and Phase Three - 1979-1980 after the election of the first black majority government led by Bishop Abel Muzorewa.

In Phase One, there would be a preliminary briefing before take-off, if Fire Force was not needed immediately. The K-Car would fly in to be talked onto the target by the personnel manning the OP (if a sighting was the reason for the call out). Difficulties of judging the position of an aircraft in the sky to a target on ground often caused delays which afforded the enemy time to escape. When over the approximate area of the target, the K-Car gunner would throw out a smoke grenade so that the OP could use the smoke to re-direct the K-Car to the target. The K-Car would then pull up to its optimum orbiting height of 800 feet and put down fire to annihilate the enemy or dissuade them from leaving the area. The G-Cars would fly in a wider pre-arranged orbit, waiting for orders to put their stops down on the escape routes. This was a somewhat rigid, slow and cumbersome procedure and was sometimes fruitless because the enemy had fled. It was soon realised that the aircrew had to look outside the circle constantly as the insurgents covered the ground at their astonishing rate of 500 metres a minute.

The changes made in Phase Two drastically improved the success ratio. The briefing would normally be held at the refuelling stop on the way to the target, to save time and because by then the OP would have crucial information on enemy movement or the lack thereof. By 1977 it was realised that the K-Car had to fly in from behind and over the OP in order to see what he was seeing and therefore waste no time in finding and marking the target with a white smoke generator. The K-Car would pull up and fire on the enemy. As the G-Cars arrived, they would fly directly to prescribed stop positions on the escape routes and orbit them individually. Instead of having to wait for the Fire Force commander, the G-Cars were given some autonomy. If the G-Car crew spotted the enemy, they could land their stop group without reference to the K-Car. If they did not spot the enemy, they would not put down their stop group. This meant that this stick remained airborne for quick deployment elsewhere. There would, however, be an alternative plan - *Plan Alpha*. The Fire Force commander would simply state '*Plan Alpha*' and the G-Cars would deposit their stop groups on the predetermined stop positions. This meant minimum delay in bottling up the enemy. Once the escape routes were sealed, the Fire Force commander would have his paratroopers brought in to sweep the area, driving the quarry into the open where the 20mm could deal with them or into the ambushes of the stop groups. The achievement of Phase Two was that the quick positioning of stops often trapped the enemy.

Phase Three, in which the 'Jumbo' Fire Force came into being, was the product of the constant availability of G-Cars in 1979 because the forces deployed on external operations at last had available the longer-range and greater troop carrying-capacity of the AB205A 'Cheetahs'. The Jumbo Fire Force was created by bringing two Fire Forces together, giving it two K-Cars, eight G-Cars, a Dakota and a Lynx, often with the support of Hawker Hunters. When the Fire Force was seven minutes out from the target, the two K-Cars would accelerate and pull away. Once directed onto the target, the K-Cars (being used like tanks on the battlefield) would immediately attack without pulling up, seeking to traumatise, if not kill, the enemy. The Fire Force commander might bring in the jet aircraft immediately with their devastating Golf bombs to lower the enemy's morale further. The effect would be to 'stabilise' the situation. Those insurgents who survived would go to ground. The stops would be in position quickly and the paratroops would follow to sweep the area. Actions that used to take an entire morning or a day thenceforth were often over in an hour. The commander of Support Commando, 1RLI, Major Nigel Henson recalls tackling and killing 22 insurgents at 6 a.m. By 7 a.m. his Fire Force was in action against ten more and, having dealt with them, was by mid-morning in a third contact.

In this last phase, the RLI took over the exclusive task of Fire Force, scoring formidable tallies of kills. In the period after the election of Muzorewa's Government in April 1979 until the ceasefire in December 1979,

One Commando, RLI, killed	450 insurgents
Two Commando	350
Three Commando	410
Support Commando	470
Total:	1680

André Dennison's fine 'A' Company, 2RAR, by contrast killed 403 insurgents in the period September 1977 to July 1979. Perhaps there is no comparison but in nine years of campaigning in Malaya, the British SAS killed 108 of their enemy.

Major Nigel Henson, who commanded Support Commando for two and a half years (1977-1979) was called out 111 times. 73 of these call-outs were in 1979 and 68 of them resulted in contacts. In 1979 only one in six call-outs were unproductive 'lemons' and this he attributes to the full deployment of the Selous Scouts on the OPs and their professionalism as well as to the experienced dedication to their task of the aircrews, himself and his men. There had always been a high rate of unsuccessful call-outs but many of them were the product of the Fire Force not spending time combing the area. In many cases, if nothing appeared, despite the OP's sighting, the Fire Force would depart. Of course, it was often ordered away by the JOC to a new target.

[Fire Force - Part 2](#)

[Return to Main Page](#)