

OPERATION URIC - GAZA, MOZAMBIQUE

1-7 September 1979

A Reconstruction.

By Alex Binda

Introduction

OP URIC is the controversial operation of The Rhodesian War. Though it resulted in over 300 enemy dead for the loss of 15 of their own (the highest of the war) the Rhodesians, with their very high operational standards, did not regard it as a success. There was bitterness too, as for the first time the Rhodesians were unable to recover the bodies of their fallen comrades; for the first time also the lightly armed Rhodesians were stopped in their tracks and forced to abandon their objective in the face of a more numerous and well dug in enemy, who, for a time at least, displayed a fighting tenacity not encountered before. Despite being armed with anti-aircraft guns and Strela (Soviet name for SAM-7 surface-to-air missile), the most effective enemy weapon proved to be the comparatively simple RPG-7 (a rocket fired from a hand held launcher) which, in the event, was responsible for all the Rhodesian fatalities.

The following reconstruction is based mostly on Richard Wood's B2 intercepts, sitreps, intreps and debrief notes which he passed on to David Heppenstall in 1992. Information on Uric is not exhaustive, apart from a few minutes of video tape. I have also consulted Barbara Cole's classic 'The Elite' pp 328-338 and Cowderoy and Nesbit's excellent 'War In The Air'. In his covering letter Richard suggests to readers of this article that "This is just an assembly of material" If any reader can explain more clearly what was happening at any particular stage please send your comments in.

Background and build-up.

At the end of 1978 some 11,000 Zanla were operating in Rhodesia and over half of these had been deployed through Mozambique's Gaza Province into the South East (OP Repulse) area of Rhodesia known as 'The Russian Front'. Of a further 15,000 who were in training a third were to be infiltrated through Gaza.

Reeling from the highly effective Selous Scouts raids and SAS-trained National Resistance (the M.N.R) Mozambique was military and economically in tatters. Samora Machel, Mozambique's volatile and excitable leader, dissatisfied with Zanla's progress, took matters into his own hands. Sitting down with his Frelimo commander Sebastiao Mabote and Robert Mugabe, the trio came to a Political/ Military agreement whereby Zanla forces in Gaza were to be totally integrated and deployed with Frelimo troops into Rhodesia in a bid to end the War. To this end Machel would supplement Zanla with a thousand Frelimo then being trained by the Russians. From this, it may well be that, given the numbers involved, a Frelimo/Zanla invasion was contemplated with the object of giving Zanla an occupied area in S.E. Rhodesia. All forces, in consultation with Mugabe, were to be under Frelimo command and the whole was to be controlled from Mapai, the Frelimo 2 Brigade HQ and control centre for Zanla - a very heavily defended forward base 50 kilometres from the Rhodesian border. It is important to note here that Rhodesian COMOPS (Combined Operations HQ) was well aware that, in addition to air support, to try

and take Mapai ordinarily would have required 2 infantry battalions conventionally supported by artillery and tanks.

Rhodesian Intelligence were first alerted to this build-up and the new situation in Gaza when a F.P.L.M. (Frelimo) soldier was captured near Kezi in Matabeleland; from this it transpired that over 200 F.P.L.M. were in Rhodesia which caused the Rhodesian political and military hierarchy to sit bolt upright because, apart from anything else the rail link to South Africa (Rutenga-Beitbridge) over which Rhodesia's fuel and ammunition travelled was now under threat. Accordingly, the Rhodesians in an attempt to take the fight into the enemy camp and thus take the pressure off the Repulse and Tangent (Matabeleland) op. areas devised operation Uric which had as its aim the complete destruction/disruption of the Frelimo/Zanla lines of communication as far back as the economically important Aldeia De Barragem (Lit. village of the dam) 93 miles N.W. of Maputo and 200 miles from Rhodesia. At Barragem the road and rail bridges over the dam, along with its vital irrigation canal feeding a major agricultural complex which produced 80% of Mozambique's cash crop, were to be demolished along with 4 lesser bridges. Air strikes would be made on Barragem, Mapai and Maxaila in an effort to so demoralise the occupants that they would abandon their bases because with their road, rail and bridge links destroyed behind them and with communications, supplies and water cut off, the enemy, especially at Mapai, would be in a very vulnerable position. Once the defenders left the situation would be exploited by heli-borne Rhodesian troops who would take and destroy what was left of Mapai. Zanla and Frelimo operating from Gaza would be without a rear base and forced to revert to the Northern routes where they could be more easily contained.

Uric would be executed by 360 ground troops drawn from the Rhodesian SAS and RLI and engineers - arguably the finest troops of their day. The superbly manned Rhodesian Air Force would deploy every available aircraft - 8 hunters, 12 Dakotas, 6 Canberras, 6 Lynx and 28 helicopters - among these last were newly arrived Rhodesian AB 205 A Cheetahs (Hueys) along with a few South African-crewed Pumas and Super Frelons on loan to the air force. (Note: something not generally known is that the South African Air Force allowed some of its aircrews to complete a tour of duty with the Rhodesians - a number of these brave men died fighting for Rhodesia with whose cause they had identified.) The OP Uric area was close to the South African border and the South Africans were of course interested. In fact OP Uric had the largest single South African involvement of the Rhodesian war.

Aerial surveillance was to be provided by a remarkable aircraft - a Dakota named Warthog, so called because it bristled with antennae and radomes. This aircraft was fitted out with monitoring equipment mounted on a large board clipped to the fuselage. This provided UHF, VHF and HF coverage with F.M. and A.M., along with a sensor system capable of picking up any radar station/system which the enemy might use to guide missiles, and the ability to identify enemy surveillance radar. Teleprinters were on board with the remarkable facility of encrypting messages typed in clear automatically and immediately. Warthog carried an intelligence officer and four signallers all skilled in identifying the 'handwriting' of operators in Zambia and Mozambique. Unarmed and confined to intelligence-gathering the Warthog was vital to cross-border operations. Richard Wood's B2 notes are littered with Warthog intreprs.

Also taking part would be the Command Dak, a converted Dakota carrying the Commander of Combined Operations, General Walls, and Air Commodore Norrnnan Walsh, Rhodesian Air Force Director-General of Operations. The commanders would orbit the operational area at a distance and would control both ground forces and aircraft using a Lynx for liaison. Politically, a successful operation would hopefully force Zanla to the negotiating table at the conference being set up at Lancaster House. Furthermore international outcry at the raid would not be as strident as before because, now in its Zimbabwe - Rhodesia transition, the country had a black Prime Minister and President.

D-Day was scheduled for 0700 hrs, Sunday, 2nd September 1979. 200 troops had been placed in an admin box 160 kilometres inside Mozambique East-South-East of Chigubu (see map). This was known as admin base Oscar Bravo (O.B.). The helicopters were at Chipinda Pools airstrip which was also an army base in Rhodesia. This was to be admin base Oscar Alpha (O.A.). Due to guti (a Rhodesian

weather peculiarity in the form of soft rain which, as it descends, resembles heavy mist) the operation was postponed for 3 tense days to Wednesday 5th September 1979.

This, then is the background to Uric, what follows is the operation itself, including the intercepts which gives us an idea of the enemy reaction reports.

1 September 1979 (D-Day -4) At 1200 the Frelimo operator at Maxaila reported helicopter movements in his area and requested reinforcements. In reply, Mapai (the controlling centre) ordered Maxaila to search the area and troops from Chigubo were also ordered to investigate the area of the enemy noise. From these intercepts the Rhodesians were aware that the enemy at Maxaila had picked up the transit movement of aircraft to the admin box. Although ready to react, the base was not compromised.

2 September 1979 (D-Day -3) The RLI minelaying teams began their tasks. Air movement from Rhodesia to the admin box consisted of transportation of water, rations, food, ammunition and fuel. 4 vehicles were seen heading for Maxaila. The most significant event of the day was electronic jamming experienced on H.F. and the command and control net at about 17.30 hrs.

3 September 1979 (D-Day -2) In an intercept Maxaila informed Mapai that the reinforcements had arrived (the Rhodesians understood this to refer to the 4 vehicles observed on the previous day) and that once again helicopter movement was observed in the direction of Chipimbi. The enemy at Pafuri had reported air movement in the Rio Wenezi area. During the morning an RLI minelaying team in a helicopter from Mabalauta forward base was fired on by a Pafuri detachment near Salane. An air strike by Lynx was requested and the 'Pafurians' were silenced. The Rhodesian mine planting efforts appeared to be bearing results as the enemy reported an explosion on the Maxaila/Domasse road in the Mapungane area. At 1615 hrs the following joint intercept was received from Warthog/Eland:

Height finder on freq 2608 hAHZ identified on 5 fixes as being 2ks west of Mapai or immediate area. Also a radar operating on 9377 MHZ PAF 398, P/width 2 dec 4. This is in low blow SAM 3 missile radar overflying Mozambique because of changing bearings on signals. Low range radar lost contact with us 40kms west of Buffalo Range F1 10 and we finally lost signal overhead Fort Vic. No flatface radar on 855 dec 5 from Mapai picked up.

With their vulnerable aircraft at stake, news of radar at Malvernia and possibly Mapai caused a few furrowed brows among the airmen. All mining tasks were completed by nightfall, and it still appeared that admin base Oscar Bravo was uncompromised as, clearly confused and unaware of the enemy's intentions, Mapai ordered all stations to be on the alert and ready to react.

By now meteorological indications were that by Wednesday (5th) the weather would clear. If so that day was to be D-Day. With this in mind the revised attack plans would be as follows: First, 4 hunters would golf-bomb Barragem (N.B. golf bombs were a Rhodesian invention with the appearance of a gas cylinder one and a half meters high and weighing 460 kilos; this percussion bomb contained amatol which was detonated by a tube one metre long at the nose of the cylinder which struck the ground first. On detonation the casing burst into over 80,000 fragments lethal at 60 meters with an accompanying stun effect for a further 60. A Hunter could carry 2 golf bombs. There was also a mini golf bomb of 80 kilos for light aircraft such as Lynx). A top cover of 2 Hunters and 2 Lynx would be overhead minutes later while the helicopters (12 Pumas and 6 Cheetahs) deployed the demolition teams. At this time also, 2 Dakotas with troops would be in reserve. Hopefully all tasks would be completed by 15.30 hrs and all troops back by 17.00 hrs.

The following day would be devoted to the destruction of Mapai - 6 Hunters would golf bomb the target at 0630 hrs followed by 6 Canberras with 1000/500 bombs. At the same time 2 Hunters and 2 Lynx, both armed, would maintain air reconnaissance in the target area to cause maximum disruption/harassment. 3 hours later the hunters, re-fuelled and re-armed, would re-strike the target. By now the defenders' nerve would be broken and they would begin to abandon the base and scatter. In this

expectation the Rhodesians were to set up a ring of ambushes on all access routes around the base in the hope that the fleeing enemy would run into them, thereby achieving a good kill rate. For this, 192 ground troops (SAS and RLI) would be deployed in 12 Pumas and 6 Cheetahs. With the benefit of hindsight, had this plan been retained this is exactly what would have happened. However, the decision to change the ambushing force into an attacking force was made later, for a number of different reasons, and, without plunging pen into dispute, I must record here that it is around this decision that controversy over Uric is centred.

4 September 1979 (D-Day - 1) Admin Box Oscar Bravo continued to be supplied by para drops. The RLI mine laying teams were again deployed on the crossroads area (Chigumane/Chigubo) and on the Southern power lines, as air recce indicated that these areas were possibly used by vehicles. An intercept from Barragem reported a faulty SAM 7 missile at Chibuto followed by a request for a replacement; as this was near the bridge targets, all Rhodesian air crews were alerted and briefed. Mapai ordered the commander at Mabalane to load 21 trucks and to search for and be ready to attack the enemy. Obviously not trying too hard, this special group later reported lack of success along with a request for fuel and food - by now it was obvious to the planners that the enemy was searching for the Rhodesians.

5 September 1979 (D-Day) Blowing the Bridges. The day dawned clear, the cloud base having lifted. Uric was on. At Oscar Alpha the air was filled with suppressed excitement, along with the familiar low pitched whine of the helicopters as the air crews checked their machines in preparation to uplift the demolition teams from the admin box. At that precise time, heading for the well-camouflaged admin box, unfortunately for them, was a platoon of 25 F.P.L.M. whose commander (it later transpired) had been doing his best to avoid the Rhodesians. Fate, however, marched him straight on to the position from where a suitably deployed RLI call sign under Major Pete Farndell had been watching them for some time. As the doomed men approached the killing ground, SAS major Paul Simmonds quickly radiobased (O.A.) to hold back the choppers. Then, with deadly Rhodesian accuracy the call sign opened fire and, in what must have been an incredibly brief and bloody firefight, and in which the totally surprised F.P.L.M. never stood a chance, 23 were killed outright and one wounded and captured - one however, miraculously escaped to raise the alarm. Major Farndell, the only Rhodesian casualty, was wounded in the leg and casevaced.

Though this unexpected contact delayed the uplift of the demolitions teams the airstrike on Barragem was dead on time. Shrieking in, the 4 hunters heading the attack struck the enemy defensive positions with direct hits on weapons, buildings (2 barrack blocks) and all transport, in the face of an intense enemy anti-aircraft barrage. 2 Lynxes then arrived over the target and began to direct the 48 SAS troops who had been dropped off a kilometre from Barragem, their helicopters heading back to a safer holding area. Rapidly the SAS then began to fight forward through the enemy defences and in the face of heavy machine gun fire; luckily they managed to capture two 23 mm A.A. guns and turned one on the enemy on both sides of the river and began quelling pockets of enemy resistance. During the initial fight through, one SAS man sustained a leg wound and a casevac was requested. In the heat of battle the incoming chopper, a Huey, piloted by Fl.Lt. Dick Paxton was misdirected and found itself hovering above a Frelimo position. Suddenly aware of the error Paxton pulled away but it was too late. There was a whoosh and an explosion above his head as an RPG7 rocket struck and severed the main rotor below the blades and with a sickening lurch the chopper fell to earth in a cloud of dust, killing the technician Alexander Wesson on impact. With a broken arm, the stunned Paxton was trapped in the cabin as the Huey now erupted into flames. Seeing this, SAS sergeant 'Flash' Smythe immediately raced up and pulled Paxton out, thereby saving his life. Smythe never received official recognition for the heroic act.

On the Barragem bridges 20 Kg charges were being set up and placed in position, a task that took 5 hours. During that time a call sign under Joey du Ploy had a good time taking the town itself, shooting up vehicles, blowing up 2 power stations and making the interesting capture of a Bulgarian water engineer from Sofia who expressed extreme displeasure at being caught! At the other 4 targets, the demolitions teams, unopposed, completed their tasks and destroyed their bridges by 16.30 hrs. As these went up the reliable Warthog now gave the following disturbing intrep:

At 1627 radar on Freq 2618 MHZ (height finder) identified a D/F position indicated between Mapai and Malvernia. It is now locked on us. Our position 55ks west of Mapai. This could be the one we found on 3 September but Freqs apart.

With radar at Mapai the next day's actions would have to be carefully co-ordinated.

Meanwhile at Mapai bad news was pouring in from all sides and one can only guess at the chaos in the enemy communications centre. Consternation first began when Mabalane reported two jets over their location flying North South then Vice Versa. Minutes later the operator at Xai-Xai informed Mapai that the enemy was attacking Chibuto by the bridge on the road to Canicado and had burnt out a truck. The bridge was also reported destroyed. (The Gaza brigade commander was in Xai-Xai at this time. One wonders how this individual managed to absent himself from his HQ at Mapai at such a vital time and place himself as far away from conflict as possible. Many Rhodesians will remember Xai-Xai as a very picturesque coastal resort.) Referring to the Mazimuchape demolitions team, Moamba reported that the area was still being overflowed and that the enemy was spread out in the zone 40 ks from Magude. Mapai then ordered Mabalane to deploy a company/section against the enemy in the Chihibuto area then, surely confused, it ordered Barragem to assist Chibuto though how this could be done was baffling as at about this time the garrison at Barragem was fighting for its life!

Once Barragem was taken the charges were set and Rhodesia's foremost demolition expert Captain Charlie Small blew the bridge - both Du Ploy and Small were tragically killed on the following day. In the fast fading light the demolition team was uplifted before being able to ascertain the damage. In the event, while the rail line was cut, 2 spans having gone down and a sluice gate damaged, the road bridge itself, with 2 spans sagging, was not completely destroyed and light vehicles were able to use it. This was not the fault of the demolition team as it was later revealed that the builders of the bridge had, at the time of construction, doubled the amount of building mix on this section. By 18.00 hrs all demolition teams were back at the admin base, not dissatisfied with the days work, though subdued by the death of Alexander Wesson. The Air Force was of course concerned about the next day's ops with regard to the enemy radar.

At 20.00 hrs the survivors at Barragem sent a formal message to the Bde commander at Xai-Xai informing him of the attack and that the bridge was destroyed. Unable to cope, they requested reinforcements. Minutes later they contacted Maputo with the same story and asked for infantry and A.A.guns. At about 20.50 hrs they gave out that they had suffered 6 dead and a number of undisclosed wounded. They also reported shooting down a helicopter and killing two of the enemy. Two hours earlier Maxaila reported bombing by 4 Rhodesian jets and requested medical supplies for 4 casualties. At about this time Pafuri came on the air informing all stations that the enemy had mined the road and that seven mines had been discovered.

6 September 1979 (D-Day +1) - The fight at Mapai. Despite the previous day's lesson at Barragem the defenders at Mapai were, unbelievably, caught completely by surprise when the hunters hit at 06.35. Many were on muster, others were eating or washing. 22 were killed outright and 32 wounded. The strike demolished the communications and command centre and blew up a small armoury. Racing up to their defensive positions the enemy were ready when the jets struck again, destroying the main fuel dump and, thankfully, the main radar station along with an A.A. gun position. In return they were welcomed by intense ground fire from a ring of some 20 medium-calibre A.A. guns but got away unscathed. The destruction of the radar station was of immediate relief to the airmen who were now maintaining air surveillance over Mapai which is in an area of Mozambique where, apart from the odd isolated Kopie, the ground is almost flat, with thick Jesse Bush. With the temperature in the nineties the helicopter-borne troops were on their way to the target area. From now on bad luck dogged the operations.

En route one Huey was forced to put down in a pan due to severe engine vibrations. The remainder, continuing on to Mapai, suddenly overflew a big enemy camp spread over a large area, and one of the Pumas, Hotel Four, was hit by an RPG-7 as it headed for its dropping zone. The result was the worst

single disaster of the Rhodesian war. The rocket struck the aircraft behind the pilot's seat and exploded, killing all 14 people aboard. Forced into a downward spin the helicopter hit the ground and burst into flames. Army call signs dispatched to the crash site found the aircraft totally destroyed, the largest pieces being the turbines; they also found the 14 bodies of their comrades and arranged for their recovery when safe to do so after the taking of Mapai. Sadly this proved impossible.

The troops were put down on their planned LZs with the choppers returning immediately to admin base to refuel. The nine Russian advisors in Mapai whose unoccupied bunker had been demolished by the Hunter strike now took the opportunity to take the proverbial gap as it was no part of their brief to get involved in any fighting. The ground forces now moving on Mapai were making slow progress due to mortar and A.A. fire. 4 Hunters then put in a strike on 3 A.A. gun positions and appeared to score hits, but A.A. fire was now coming up all round the area.

Advancing on Mapai, the Rhodesians began to notice a trench complex with shelters and cooking positions. Crossing the road before the complex they shook out into extended line for the assault. As they went into a sandal wood, 'A' Sqn walked past a FPLM in a tree platform acting as early warning. A member of 'B' Sqn made no such error and shot him out of the tree. As he toppled down it was noticed that everything he wore was brand new, even down to his pistol and binoculars. It was the first of a few such devices. Through the sandal wood the troops now came up against 2 kilometres of Russian-designed interconnecting zig-zag trenches. Call sign 11 noticed heads bobbing up and down along the trench line and movement from left to right. Heavy firing now broke out and the contact started.

The surprised Rhodesians now found that, contrary to all plans and expectations, the enemy had not evacuated the base and fled as anticipated. Instead they were here and, from a very good defensive position, were offering battle as never before. Even the hardened veterans amongst the troops admitted later that they had never been under such intense fire from small arms, mortars and recoilless rifles. Having previously set the grass alight 30 FPLM now had call signs 14, 13, 19 and 11 pinned down along with 'A' Sqn's mortars. 'A' Sqn itself was being engaged by two machine guns and were pinned down for 5 to 10 minutes. Then, moving away, the enemy occupied a large trench system on the Rhodesian left flank. 'A' Sqn's mortars, now free, began to fire their 60mm's, mortaring the enemy position as call sign 14 was still pinned down. This merely drew more fire. Indicating the enemy position by 60mm smoke bomb the Rhodesians called in a Hunter strike. Using their 30mm cannon the Hunters duly 'Stoncked' the FPLM position, drawing a terrific amount of A.A. fire from at least 6 to 8 gun positions. The strike had no effect.

The local commander of Mapai, using a mobile means, was speaking urgently with Maputo and his Bde commander at Xai-Xai:

General, chief of staff ground forces, and all command commanders. From 06.30 hrs until now there is combat at Bde HQ both by air and airborne troops. There are dead and wounded. Up till now the same situation continues. The same as in Chocue and Aldeia de Barragem.

In the orbiting command Dak a no less anxious General Walls was assessing the unexpected turn of events following on the tragic loss of 17 of his very fine troops and an irreplaceable helicopter.

On the ground, his lightly armed men now began the dirty and deadly business of trench clearing. Call sign 11 moved into the trench line to the immediate front of the sweep line, while 'C' Sqn occupied the left side. 2 members of 'A' Sqn already in the trench could see 7 FPLM firing at them from across a zig-zag line of trenches; when they returned fire the enemy moved away in the Northward direction where they were seen by call sign 19. The 2 'A' Sqn men now heard A A fire to their front while 3 other members of the Sqn moved along the trench line, observing and firing as they went along. This sort of fighting was being experienced by all the attackers and contacts now began to occur at point blank range. Clearing some 200 metres of zig-zag to the front the troops saw firing positions which had all

been used, judging by the blankets, boots, clothing, water bottles and empty magazines lying about. They also saw 2 cooking positions and an O P.

A very alarming development now occurred! The troops, having cleared an area, would suddenly find the enemy popping up behind them due to the intricate criss-cross pattern of the trenches. This caused the attack to falter and come to a virtual standstill as the troops were now having to contend with enemy to the front and rear. In the exhausting heat the SAS, faces caked with filth and pouring sweat called out to the FPLM to surrender, but in reply were sworn at in Portuguese. Then, hearing voices to the North they made ready to attack. 3 FPLM now crept up on call sign 11 and showed themselves, then ducked down only to pop up again complete with RPG 7 with which they rocketed the call sign, but fortunately missed.

As this was going on General Walls was coming to a swift and unenviable decision. Though outnumbered his troops outmatched the enemy and he knew they could take Mapai through sheer infantry skill and fighting spirit. What he was not prepared to accept were the inevitable casualties victory would cost. Accordingly he gave the order for the troops to withdraw back to the LZs for uplift back to base. In a Lynx above the battle, directing the troops, was Lt Dave Padbury, who relayed the general's orders with mixed feelings.

Richard Wood's B2 file P16 - In an interview on 18 February 1988, Padbury told Wood: The reason for the pull-out was that it was getting late and the troops on the ground did not want to stay through the night if the position was not taken. There was, he says, acute sensitivity to the amount of recent casualties and Comops did not want to damage public morale. That day the Puma Hotel 4 had been shot down and there was no desire to lose men unnecessarily. General Walls in the command dak took the decision against the feelings of Padbury who was in a Lynx above the battle and taking 'on the spot' decisions. Padbury was right, as it turned out, because a high level Canberra attack, using the resources allocated for target 19, broke the FPLM nerve. A defector from Malvernia a few weeks later would reveal that the FPLM in the trench network were prepared to stay and fight it out until the Canberra airstrike. They pulled out en masse from the trenches and ran to a pre-arranged R.V. on the railway line and did not return until 2 days later.

The troops now pulled out of Mapai and began a weary walk through the thick bush back to the LZs some eight kilometres North West of Mapai, and although there was no F.P.L.M. patrolling activity the helicopters, having uplifted all the call signs and speeding back to base at tree-top level, were, to their horror, met by a hail of harrowing fire from an FPLM reception committee awaiting them with RPG7, small arms and 23mm and 12.7mm machine guns as they burst into the open over the Maxaila Road. Only their speed saved them. Meanwhile the remains of the wrecked helicopter was golf-bombed in a vain effort to destroy any S.A. Markings.

Six Canberras, at high bombing level (over 20,000ft), dropped the final bomb load on Mapai, turned about and headed for base, totally unaware that they were the 'final straw' that broke the enemy at Mapai.

With the withdrawal from Mapai and the compromise of the admin box OP URIC was terminated.

Evaluation Note.

OP URIC along with OP miracle at Chimoio (28 Sept - 1 Oct 1979) were the last large external operations of the war. In both of these the Rhodesians underestimated the enemy. Although never put to the final test, it was becoming obvious that the under-equipped Rhodesians with their obsolete weapons and aircraft would eventually become technologically inferior to the enemy. For example, there is no doubt that if Tanzania had scrambled its Mig fighter bombers and joined in the fight the Rhodesian air force would have come unstuck without South African help. Not only were Rhodesian aircraft outdated, there was also not enough of them - after an air strike the hunters required a turn-about of over 3 hours to return to base to refuel and rearm before a restrike. During this time the ground troops would be

hard-pressed. The Canberras, bought in 1958, were positively prehistoric and well past their safe flying date. In fact, for fear of metal fatigue, they went at no more than 270 knots. In his autobiography, Moshe Dayan makes this point very well. Israeli circumstances were not unlike those of Rhodesia - a small country with a small, efficient Army and Air force surrounded by more numerous and hostile neighbours:

... we had never imagined that we could ever match the size of the arsenals possessed by the Arab states. But we believed we could bridge the gap by the superior fighting capacity of our troops, so long as we could match the quality of their weapons. In modern warfare, however, the elements of range, speed and fire power in technologically advanced aircraft, naval vessels and armour can be so superior that inferior weapons are simply unable to stand up to them. For every rise in standards of an enemy's arms, there must be a minimum means of reply. Without it no amount of courage can get the better of objective technical superiority. A brilliant pilot in a propeller aircraft has no chance against mediocrity in a jet...

By any analysis the Rhodesian performance during URIC was nothing short of heroic. Here, some 400 men, deep in hostile enemy territory and under-armed, 'knocked hell' out of the enemy economically (Barragem) and militarily (Mapai etc) and in the process killed over 25 of the enemy for each one of their own who fell. Politically it was also a success because Samora Machel had taken enough and, grabbing Robert Mugabe in a political armlock, he steered the unwilling and protesting Zanu leader to the conference table at Lancaster House.

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