

Brief History of the Rhodesian Army



Post-UDI Rhodesian Army badge

The beginnings of the Rhodesian Army go back to 29 October, 1889, when the Royal Charter was granted by Queen Victoria to the British South Africa Company, authorising it to raise a police force for the territories that were intended to come under its control north of the Limpopo River.

One hundred men were enrolled initially, almost entirely from the BBP (Bechuanaland Border Police), to accompany the Pioneer Column and this force was officially designated the "British South Africa Company Police". For the march into Mashonaland this number was later increased to 500.

By 1892, a couple of years after the successful occupation of Mashonaland the number of men in the force had decreased and the BSACP was replaced by a number of volunteer forces - the Mashonaland Horse, the Mashonaland Mounted Police and the Mashonaland Constabulary.

The peace did not last for long, however, and the outbreak of the Matabele War in 1893 saw the total number of volunteers for police service rise to about 1000 men in a number of new units - the Salisbury Horse, Victoria Rangers and Raaf's Rangers. With the assistance of the BBP the power of the Matabele was broken in a three month campaign in which the most memorable event was the last stand of the 34 men of the Shangani Patrol. Cornered by a large Matabele force near the banks of the Shangani River, the men of the patrol had no option but to fight to the last man, refusing to surrender. The battle lasted from sunrise to sunset and after the battle the Matabele paid tribute to the bravery of the men of the patrol.

The volunteer regiments were disbanded in December 1893 and a new force named the Rhodesia Horse was formed. For the policing of Matabeleland another force named the Matabeleland Mounted Police was raised.

Many of the police accompanied Dr. Jameson on his raid into the Transvaal in 1895 to help the Englishmen who were rebelling against the Boer government there. The raid failed and Jameson and his men were all captured. The raid, having left the colony almost undefended, led indirectly to the Mashona and Matabele Rebellions in 1896. The fighting lasted until 1898, with British troops arriving from Natal and the Cape to help the beleaguered colonists. The two forces of police were amalgamated into the Rhodesia Mounted Police and in 1909, much expanded, this force became known as the British South Africa Police (BSAP), the name it was to retain until 1980.

The population of the territory increased rapidly and a purely military force, as opposed to police, was raised in 1898, called the Southern Rhodesia Volunteers (SRV). This unit was divided into an Eastern Division, based in Salisbury, and a Western Division, based in Bulawayo.

The SRV served in the Boer War and took part in the relief of Mafeking, where a division of the BSAP were among the defenders. A new unit, the Rhodesia Regiment, was also formed at this time, mainly for the defence of Rhodesia, but this unit was also sent to serve in the Boer War.

With the end of the Boer War, a fledgling Rhodesian Army was in being, based on the British Army, and the first King's Colour and Regimental Colour were awarded to the SRV.

The original Rhodesia Regiment had been disbanded shortly after the siege of Mafeking, but the unit was revived in 1914 to form two regiments to fight alongside the Commonwealth troops in South West Africa and East Africa (and later in France) during the First World War. The Rhodesia Native Regiment, which was formed at the same time, earned the battle honour "East Africa 1916-1918", this honour later being transferred to the Rhodesian African Rifles, which later absorbed the RNR. The Rhodesia Regiments were also awarded their first battle honours.

The Southern Rhodesia Volunteers were disbanded in 1920, although a few rifle companies were retained in each of the main towns of Rhodesia.

The Defence Act of 1927 finally created a Permanent Force and a Territorial Force for the colony, although little progress was made in the period up to 1939, at which time the police were finally separated from the military, and conscription for the latter introduced.

The war years of 1939-1945 saw the rapid expansion of the Rhodesian armed forces, with the addition of a number of full-time units, including the 1st Battalion RAR, an artillery unit, an armoured car unit, and training schools in Gwelo and Umtali. Rhodesians served in many British units during the war and supplied 3 squadrons to the RAF. After the war, the King conferred the title of "Royal" on the Rhodesia Regiment.

In 1951 a volunteer group called the Rhodesia Squadron Malayan Scouts was raised for service with the Commonwealth troops in Malaya, and in 1952 Rhodesia again supplied troops for service abroad in the Suez Canal zone.

During the period of Federation, the army was totally reorganised and each corps now received the prefix "Rhodesia and Nyasaland". In 1955 units of the RAR were sent to Malaya to replace the Northern Rhodesia Regiment serving there. It was also during this period that the Rhodesian Air Force finally became established as a separate service with its own HQ. Two other units were formed in 1961 that were later to play an important role in the bush war of the 1970s, namely the 1st Battalion The Rhodesian Light Infantry, and "C" Squadron, Rhodesian SAS Regiment.

With the breakup of Federation in 1964 the army again underwent a large- scale reorganization, with the units reverting to their original territories, two of which had now gained independence from Britain. Southern Rhodesia took matters into its own hands in 1965 with a "Unilateral Declaration of Independence" (UDI), and this signalled the start of a prolonged effort by Communist-supported guerrillas to force the whites to relinquish power.

From April 1966 onwards groups of guerrillas infiltrated Rhodesia from neighbouring Zambia in steadily increasing numbers, but the bush war is generally considered to have started in earnest on 21 December 1972 when an attack took place on a farm in the Centenary District, with further attacks on other farms in the following days.

As the guerrilla activity increased in 1973 "Operation Hurricane" started and the military prepared itself for war. During 1974 a major effort by the security forces resulted in many guerrillas being killed and

the number inside the country reduced to less than 100.

The year 1974 also saw the fall of Portuguese rule in Mozambique and the eventual opening of a second "front" in the bush war, necessitating the creation and expansion of a number of specialist units. The Selous Scouts, named after Rhodesia's most famous big game hunter, was a mostly black unit which conducted a highly successful clandestine war against the guerrillas by posing as guerrillas themselves. Their unrivalled tracking abilities, survival and COIN skills made them one of the most feared and hated of the army units. Another new unit, the Grey's Scouts, reintroduced cavalry into the Rhodesian army, forming a highly mobile and aggressive unit which could follow the enemy into otherwise inaccessible areas with greater speed than infantry. A ceasefire in 1974 gave the guerrillas time to regroup and resupply, but produced no political solution to the war.

In 1976 Operations "Thrasher" and "Repulse" started in order to contain the ever-increasing influx of guerrillas. At the same time rivalry between the two main guerrilla factions increased and resulted in open fighting in the training camps in Tanzania, with over 600 deaths. The Soviets increased their influence and began to take a more active role in the training and control of the ZIPRA guerrillas. New tactics were developed on both sides.

Perhaps too late, the Rhodesians decided to take the war to the enemy, and cross-border operations, which had started in 1976 with a raid on a major base in Mozambique in which the Rhodesians had killed over 1200 guerrillas and captured huge amounts of weapons, were stepped up. Attacks on large guerrilla camps such as Chimoio and Tembue resulted in thousands of guerrilla deaths and the capture of supplies sorely needed by the Rhodesians. In 1979 as the war increased even more in intensity, the Rhodesian army was able to take delivery of eight T54/55 heavy tanks which the South Africans had confiscated from a Libyan freighter when it mistakenly docked at Durban while en route to Tanzania.

In 1978 the Rhodesian Air Force launched the daring "Green Leader" attack on a ZIPRA camp outside Lusaka, the Rhodesian fighters completely taking over Zambian air space for the duration of the raid. In September the guerrillas again took the offensive by shooting down a Rhodesian airliner with a SAM-7 missile. Eighteen civilians who survived the crash were subsequently massacred at the crash site by ZIPRA guerrillas, increasing calls for massive retaliation by the Rhodesian security forces.

In 1979 another airliner was shot down and the Rhodesians launched more raids on guerrilla bases, successfully avoiding air-defence systems and the Soviet MiG-17s based in Mozambique. A raid was made by the SAS and the Selous Scouts on the ZIPRA HQ in Lusaka, where they narrowly missed being able to kill the ZIPRA leader, Nkomo.

Towards the end of 1979 talks had begun at Lancaster House in England, with both sides seriously interested in stopping the war, but Rhodesian cross-border raids continued in the meantime, hitting supply lines, strategic bridges and railways in an effort to convince Zambia and Mozambique to put pressure on the guerrilla leaders to end the war. Rhodesian losses in men and aircraft were increasing, whereas the supply of equipment and recruits to the guerrillas seemed endless.

By the end of 1979 therefore it was becoming obvious that the Rhodesians would be unable to bring the war to a speedy end, despite the fact that their troops were winning every battle and skirmish they engaged in, and that the guerrillas had not yet "liberated" any part of the country.

A political agreement was finally signed in December 1979, and new elections took place. Commonwealth troops monitored the proceedings, but for a while it seemed that the Rhodesian army, still in control, might stage a coup to prevent a Marxist takeover, with troops and tanks on standby at strategic points in the capital. When it became clear that Mugabe had won a decisive victory at the polls, however, the military reluctantly accepted that there was no point in resuming the war and a new crisis was avoided.

The first year of independence saw the dissolution of the Rhodesian security forces as the agreement to

integrate the former guerrillas into the regular army was implemented. Lack of discipline among the guerrillas caused problems, but the major cause of friction was the fact that the two main guerrilla groups distrusted each other and formed their own rival "camps" in the army. When ZANU introduced the "Fifth Brigade", a new unit trained by North Koreans and loyal only to Mugabe, which gained a reputation for killing civilians, the writing was on the wall for the army as the Rhodesians had known it.

The Commander, Lt.Gen. Walls, was dismissed by Mugabe, and as the traditional British style discipline broke down in the army, many whites left the country. In the course of 1980 most of the front-line units were disbanded or simply faded away. Disillusionment among the troops was great and the departure of many men to find employment elsewhere contributed to the lack of ceremonial disbandment of some of the units.

The prime example of the fading away of a unit was the case of the Selous Scouts. Because of their clandestine operations and since many of their troops were ex-guerrillas who had been "turned", it was not surprising that after the election an order was immediately given for the Scouts to dispose of their regimental insignia and wear other badges instead. Many Scouts elected to disappear over the border, taking their weapons with them. The majority eventually enlisted in the SADF in comparable elite units, such as the "Recces". There was no parade and no public acknowledgment of their services to their country. Their regimental standard was taken across the border and in 1990 was laid up at Phalaborwa in the unit chapel of the SADF's "5 Recce Regiment".

The RLI was officially disbanded on 25 July 1980 at a last parade before a small crowd, with the troops that had constituted the most formidable unit of fighting men in Rhodesia marching past their War Memorial - the "Trooper" statue. The Roll of Honour was read out and the bagpipes played "The Last Post". The regimental colour was marched past for the last time, and three days later the Trooper statue was dismantled and spirited away to South Africa along with the rest of the regimental memorabilia.

The Rhodesian SAS also held a simple flag-lowering ceremony and then mounted their last top-secret operation in which they smuggled their 25-ton plinth across the border to South Africa for safekeeping.

The RAR, composed mainly of African troops, was the only unit not disbanded in 1980. Because of the rivalry between the guerrilla factions, it was fortunate for the new government that the highly-disciplined troops of the RAR remained on hand. In November full-scale fighting broke out between the rival guerrilla groups near Bulawayo with over 500 casualties, and ironically it was the RAR - his former enemy - that Mugabe sent in to quell the fighting among his own former guerrillas. In February 1981 fighting again broke out, this time involving over 10,000 ex-guerrillas. The RAR, which Mugabe had now wanted disbanded, was again sent in to separate the combatants, which they did very efficiently. By December, however, the situation in the Zimbabwe military had deteriorated and many troopers left the RAR, rendering it largely ineffective. On 31 December the order was given to integrate the remainder of the RAR with other units and the last remnants of the Rhodesian army faded away.



Rhodesian Army Flag, post-UDI up to 1980

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