

## RHODESIA'S SELOUS SCOUTS

by Chris Vermaak  
(written in 1977)

**This in depth report by Chris Vermaak on the Selous Scouts attempts to set the record straight before the event. Chris Vermaak is one of the most experienced and respected correspondents in Africa and has a long and deep knowledge of the turmoils that have beset the continent over the last 20 years. The report on the Scouts we feel will surely prove to be of great interest to anyone interested in Terrorist activities.**

Rhodesia's crack Selous Scouts, a tough and highly selected band of men, White and Black, who are said to be possibly the best and toughest bush fighters in the world, have been branded as a bunch of demented killers by terrorists and their Marxist henchmen who have never hesitated to twist the truth to suit their own sinister ends.



In any case of atrocity, there are those whose interest is served by publishing the facts, those who seek to prevent publicity being attracted to those facts, and those who seek to manipulate selected facts to shift the blame away from the guilty parties. Thus we find that a number of recent acts of ruthless violence in Rhodesia which were indeed committed by terrorists belonging either to the Nkomo or Mugabe wing of the so-called Patriotic Front have been consistently attributed to the Selous Scouts. The lie has been spread abroad by both Nkomo and Mugabe, perpetuated by a number of misguided church leaders, gullible journalists guided only by financial preferences and foreign deserters from the Rhodesian forces who should never have been allowed into the country in the first place.

The underlying motive for these deliberate lies, completely divorced from proven facts, must seem obvious to those acquainted with terrorist and Marxist strategy - namely, the creation of an ever-increasing rift between the population and members of the armed forces, to neutralise the vital battle for the hearts and minds of people enmeshed by the war. To attempt division and dissension within the army itself. Predictably the Selous Scouts, Rhodesia's answer to terrorist infiltration, its most battle-hardened unit, has been selected for this dubious purpose. This superb band of men is being crucified almost daily as murderers and butchers of innocent people, baby-bashers, blood-crazed maniacs.

As contemporary military correspondents we remember very well a not too distant parallel - the vilification of the crack Portuguese commando's who bore the brunt of the fighting in Mozambique and Angola. They fought well and died well. They were the victims of consistent Frelimo abuse, aimed at alienating them from the population and stigmatising them as a band of ruthless killers, intent on systematic genocide. Frelimo's sustained campaign of hate and suspicion, fanned by the emergent Armed Forces Movement (AFM) ideology from Lisbon eventually paid off, to such an extent that the commando's were despised and ostracised by the thousands of dismal toy soldiers who never ventured near the front.

Communist strategy seldom differs and another case in point concerns the German Battalion in former French Indochina. Consisting of men who escaped possible war crimes trials in Europe after World War II, they joined the French Foreign Legion and shot, bombed, tortured and bayoneted their way into the Viet Minh. Theirs was a war of reprisals and vicious counter-reprisals, of criminal violence on both sides, of outrages against humanity, of war at its rawest, cruellest and most gruesome. Stumped by

veterans who gave even more than they received, the treacherous Viet Minh embarked on a systematic campaign of denigration, using the Communist press and some Western media.

The French were rebuked for using their erstwhile enemies to further their "imperialistic designs" and henceforth the German Battalion ceased to exist. The "Battalion of the Damned" as they preferred to call themselves had lived exactly 1,243 days, during which it destroyed 7,466 guerillas by body count, 221 Viet Minh bases, supply dumps, and camps; it liberated 311 military and civilian prisoners from terrorist captivity and covered roughly 11,000 kilometres on foot. They lost 515 men - to them a very heavy loss indeed. The Viet Minh had scored a resounding victory, to be followed 700 days later by the tragedy of Dien Bien Phu, the ultimate French humiliation.

I thought of all these things when I interviewed huge Joshua Nkomo in the unkept garden of Zimbabwe House, ZAPU's headquarters in Conakry Road, Lusaka. He said killings in Rhodesia by the security forces were becoming as regular as detailed weather reports. He continued:

When met by the ruthless Selous Scouts our people - men, women and children - are asked a few questions and shot." He claimed he could produce a witness - there was no sign of him - who could testify to a "particularly degenerate" security force atrocity near the southern Botswana border. His story: "Six women - three with babies on their backs - had identified themselves to members of the Selous Scouts before crossing the Shashi River. They had conspicuous front and back identity tags. When they walked down towards the river the three mothers were gunned down. They died, but not the babies on their backs. One of the Scouts asked: "What must we do with the babies?" Others answered by slitting their throats with bayonets. They were buried in a common grave. A son who inquired after his mother was also shot.

Almost humbly, with incredible hypocrisy, he told the world press:

Freedom fighters are told not to molest civilians, to concentrate only on military targets. Our people are being killed in their hundreds by the Selous Scouts to make the people hate the freedom movement. The freedom fighters are under strict instruction not to touch civilians no matter what their colour. These Scouts are beginning to kindle a bitterness in Zimbabwe towards the White people. The cutting of young children's throats and the shooting of women returning from their fields are beginning to have a cumulative effect on the minds of the people against the White people. If these atrocities do not cease, the Whites will be regarded as part and parcel of Smith. Sustained genocide by the Scouts will lead to a very serious rift between Whites and Blacks and it will reach a stage when my people won't distinguish between the guilty and the innocent.

Only the totally uninformed, the very dumb or the feebly sentimental will be taken in by Mr. Nkomo's exaggerated claims which follow a distinct line, traceable to the Lupane murders on December 5, 1976, when a member of Nkomo's terrorist group, Albert Sumne Ncube, killed Bishop Adolph Schmitt, Father Possenti Weggarten and Sister Maria Francis, on a road near Lupane. According to Sister Ermenfried, the only survivor, the terrorist denounced the missionaries as "enemies of the people" before opening fire. Ncube, who was later captured by the police, admitted these and other murders as well as undergoing terrorist training in ZAPU camps in Tanzania. He subsequently escaped from custody, however, and may have returned to Zambia.

On Sunday, December 19, 1976, a group of Mugabe terrorists from Mozambique slaughtered 27 defenceless African workers on a tea estate in the Honde Valley in front of their wives and children. They then withdrew to Mozambique.

On Sunday February 6, 1977 a group of 12 Mugabe terrorists murdered Father Martin Thomas, SJ, Father Christopher Shepherd-Smith, SJ, Brother John Conway, SJ, Sister Epiphany Bertha Schneider, OP, Sister Joseph Paulina Wilkinson, OP, Sister Magdala Christa Lewandoski, OP, and sister Ceslaus

Anna Steiger, OP, at St. Paul's Mission, Musami.

According to Father Dunstan Myerscough, SJ, who survived, together with Sister Anna Victoria Reggel, OP, the murders were "obviously the result of Russian indoctrination. In my opinion, if you want proof the Communists are behind this, come to the mission. The terrorists must have been got at to have that brutality in them." He said he had no doubt of the terrorists' culpability.

Apart from the fact that all these brutal slayings took place on Sundays, thereby indicating that they were planned operations rather than irresponsible acts of folly, as has been claimed by embarrassed terrorist supporters, it is important to note that in all cases the survivors or witnesses were under no doubt whatsoever that the culprits were terrorists belonging to either the Nkomo or Mugabe factions.

The terrorists' culpability was proved beyond any doubt when security forces found an incriminating diary in the possession of a slain terrorist. He described in full how his group had slain the missionaries and how a number of other civilians had been murdered farther afield, concluding: "We were very lucky".

These facts have not, however, deterred the terrorist leaders from attempting to blame the Rhodesian security forces and especially the Selous Scouts, or from attributing these acts of violence to the "inevitable" consequences of Rhodesian government policies. Thus Mr. Nkomo and Mr. Mugabe both denied that the Lupane murders could have been the work of their "Patriotic Front". To quote Mr. Nkomo:

It is a tragedy to be looked at against the background of the whole situation and the people of the Smith regime who are causing the continuation of the war. Selous Scouts do this sort of thing to make the guerrilla movement unpopular.

He did, however, call for an international inquiry into the Honde massacre for which his uneasy partner, Mr. Mugabe's followers were responsible.

Terrorist comments on the Honde massacre and the Musami murders have combined this type of accusation with sentimental protestations of innocence. Thus, according to Mr. Mugabe's interview with the BBC on February 8, 1977:

We are not capable of such inhumanity (as the Musami murders). After all, we are fighting a progressive war which is aimed at mobilising all the democratic forces capable of lending support to the Revolution and all along we have been working very harmoniously with all the church organisations.

A Similar line has been adopted by Radio Maputo, the Zambian "Daily Mail" and other channels expressing the views of the "frontline" Presidents.

Coupled with these accusations against the Selous Scouts were "authoritative" reports by leftist journalist David Martin and a deserter from the Rhodesian forces who peddled his story in London. Quoting nationalist sources, Martin, based in Lusaka (undesirable in Rhodesia), reported in The Guardian that "there can be no doubt that the Selous Scouts had been involved in the recent atrocities".

The deserter claimed that he had in fact overheard members of the Scouts planning and discussing the atrocities. Adding to the barrage, Botswana claimed at the beginning of May that Rhodesia had been linked to the killing of two people and the wounding of 80 others when a Russian-made hand grenade was tossed on to a crowded dance floor in Francistown. Stating that a Rhodesian coloured had been arrested in connection with the incident at the Mophane Club and condemning the bombing as an "act of sabotage and barbarism," the office of the Botswana President said seven Black Rhodesians had been arrested. The statement said the Rhodesians, in refugee camps in Francistown and Selebi-Pikwe, had admitted being members of the Selous Scouts sent to spy on refugees. They had entered the country as

refugees but when they were questioned by the police they admitted that they had been sent by the Rhodesian Government to spy on the situation of the refugee camps for possible attacks. Later reports said the seven Selous Scouts had asked for political asylum and that they had been allowed to travel to Zambia.

Without positive proof, Mr. Philip Steenkamp, Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President, said he believed the explosion was connected with Rhodesia's crack anti-guerrilla Selous Scouts unit. The seven "defectors" will no doubt be paraded in front of the world press to add further evidence to mounting Selous Scouts dossiers. Fact or fiction, the lie is gaining impetus and the impact is bound to be the same. Reading into Marxist intentions, the Selous Scouts will be hounded ruthlessly to single them out as the best "horror cast" in the business. The eventual aim of course, is to discredit them in the eyes of both White and Black Rhodesians with the ultimate hope of sapping them psychologically and creating a public outcry against their "murderous" ventures. For it is common knowledge that the Rhodesian security forces cannot pursue the war successfully without the unique qualities of the hand-picked Selous Scouts.

In purely military terms the terrorists cannot improve their position and the Selous Scouts have proved to be their enemies in more ways than one.

Understandably bitter about the terror accusation against its crack unit and lest it should be accused of attempting to conceal the "awful truth", the Rhodesian Government recently reacted by lifting, for the first time, the cloak of secrecy which has surrounded the Scouts since its inception as a tracking combat unit in October 1974. A small group of international newsmen were allowed access to their training base where, for the Scouts, it all begins. Here journalists understood the terrorists' dilemma when they were told that by March 1977 conservative estimates were that the Selous Scouts had accounted for 1,205 terrorist kills, losing a mere ten of their own men. By any means a remarkable record.



The advanced training base is about an hour's drive from Kariba, or a 30-minute boat trip on the edge of the famous man-made lake. It consists of a collection of grass roofed huts which, at first glance resemble a prisoner-of-war camp like those used by the Japanese in World War 11. The camp, known as the Wafa Wafa, takes its name from the Shona words Wafa Wasara which loosely translated means **Those who die, die - those who stay behind, stay behind.**

It is an appropriate motto - because the gruelling selection course here "kills off" more recruits than those who survive to finish successfully. That any of the recruits survive the training period at all seems a minor miracle, but they do and subsequently become the Rhodesian answer to terrorist infiltration.

Principally they are taught to kill and survive and, in training, are pushed to their physical limits. Rations are cut to one sixth of that given to a man on normal active service.

It is therefore appropriate to describe the grassy encampment as the selection and tracker-training headquarters of one of the most specialised and toughest fighting forces ever seen.

Among the many tests they undergo is one where they are dropped in the bush with a gun, 20 rounds of ammunition, a match and material to strike it, and an egg. Lions, buffalo and elephant abound and the object is to have the egg hard-boiled and ready for inspection the following morning.

The Scouts' operational record was sketched briefly by a Rhodesian Journalist:

Shrouded in secrecy with a mystique that spawns a thousand stories, many true and most mere rumour, the Scouts have in only two years become the most-decorated outfit in the Rhodesian security forces collecting along the way amongst many other awards - six Silver Crosses (the highest award for gallantry yet presented); 11 Bronze Crosses; six orders for Members of the Legion of Merit for acts of bravery, seldom reported, but which have all played a major part in fighting the country's terror war.

The Selous Scouts is fully-integrated, with an undisclosed number of soldiers - but the ratio is eight Blacks to two White troops.

The initial selection procedures last for about 18 days and are probably the most rigorous in the world. Every man who goes to the camp is a volunteer - and many are highly experienced, battle-hardened soldiers who find that after a few days they simply cannot stand the strain. Small wonder that following the most recent selection course, only 14 out of 126 volunteers made the grade.

The officer commanding the Selous Scouts, and the driving force behind it, is Major Ron Reid-Daly, a 47 year old regular soldier who was once regimental sergeant-major of the Rhodesian Light Infantry, known as "The Incredibles." He learned his job with the British Special Air Service in Malaya after leaving his native Salisbury in 1950 to go to England, and he served with the SAS during the Communist terror war there in the early 1950's.

The prison camp analogy does not elude Reid-Daly.

I reckon in most armies today I simply wouldn't be allowed to put these poor bastards through the kind of selection course we give them. They'd think I was trying to kill the men who volunteer to join us. I agree, there is something of the prison camp attitude towards our men under selection and training. We take them to the very threshold of tolerance mentally - and it's here that most of them crack. You can take almost any fit man and train him to a high standard of physical ability. But you can't give a man what he hasn't already got inside him.

Under selection each man is reduced to below a threshold which the average human being could not endure. He is virtually "dehumanised", forced to live off rats, snakes, baboon meat and eyes, to survive in hostile surroundings which prove that nature, too, can be as deadly as any human enemy. And they are taught to live off nature, to drink from the water in the carcass of a dead animal - a yellowish liquid - and to eat maggot-ridden green meat which can be cooked only once before becoming deadly poisonous.

Students are not given rations except for water. They are expected to survive off the land, making their own fires without matches, and making and using bark string - "gusi tambo" - to help catch food for themselves. They are soon hungry enough to capture any small creatures they can find - grasshoppers, lizards and squirrels - to stave off the hunger. "And you do get hungry." said one student who had recently been on the survival course. "We caught and killed a small leguaan, and before we even had

time to skin it, one of the men was ready to take a bite out of it".

The Selous Scouts have for the first time admitted that they have been used on hot pursuit raids into Mozambique including the highly spectacular and tactically successful raid on the Nyadzonya terrorist training camp last August in which over 300, and possibly more than 500, terrorists were killed.

For those who come through the selection course there follows a posting to one of the small sections on operations, after a short tracking course, initially as a flank tracker. They work in remote parts of Rhodesia hunting down terrorist spoor and leading the infantry in for the kill if the invading group is too big for the small two or three man teams to handle on their own. Each member of the Selous Scouts, down to the lowest ranking White soldier, speaks at least one African language - necessary for communication with their Black comrades-in-arms with whom they work in the closest possible context as equals.

Tracking survival and close-combat tactics are high on the list of the Scouts' training priorities. From what newsmen saw at Wafa Wafa camp it takes a very special kind of man to qualify for service in what has become Rhodesia's elite and much-envied military unit. Yet Major Reid-Daly detests the word elite:

We do not consider ourselves an elite group of men, nor do we think we are of the highest calibre. It could cause the men to imagine themselves better than they really are and this could in turn lead to recklessness. We are simply just trackers out to do a job.

About training procedures, Major Reid-Daly, as tough as they come, explained:

We take a chap right down when he first comes here, right to the bottom. And then we build him up again into what we need in the Selous Scouts. Some people might say it's a dehumanising process, and maybe it is. But as far as I'm concerned, that's the way it has to be if we have to keep this unit up to standard. I have heard of all sorts of so-called crack outfits becoming nothing more than shadows of what they were because of a lowering of standards to increase the numbers of men going through into combat. And I'm determined not to let that happen here.

You see these men sometimes in town, with their chocolate-brown berets and green belts with an osprey badge. The osprey is a bird of prey, a fish eater, not common, but found in small numbers in many parts of the world where there are large stretches of water. The badge - previously the unofficial badge of Rhodesia's tracking men - was drawn up in commemoration of Andre Rabie, the first regular instructor of tracking. He was killed on active service in 1973.

Most of the men who are involved in this anti-terror outfit regard Andre Rabie as having being the inspiration behind the Selous Scouts.

The Selous Scouts have one of the best stocked aviaries in Rhodesia. They have also added a snake park. Not as frivolous as it sounds. The emphasis is on bush survival and in order to survive for many days at a time if necessary, the men must be able to recognise and make use of whatever vegetation, birds, animals and insects the bush has to offer. They must also learn to understand and turn to advantage what they see. An instructor said:

Everything is of some use to you in the veld. The more you get familiar with it, the better your chance of survival. The ignorant person bumbles into trouble wherever he goes. Certain birds give your presence away. Butterflies, which some people see as nothing but pretty little insects, are a potent indication of water in the winter months. We aim to make our students at home in the environment in which they work. Vegetation not only provides them with food in times of need. It plays one of the basic roles in tracking. And certain trees are used medically. The marula gives the best anti-histamine you can find.

Many of the men are trained parachutists to enable them to reach an area quickly when their tracking skills are required.

Their stories of survival in the bush are manifold - like the youngster from Salisbury who spent 18 days in the bush trying to evade a terrorist gang who were hot after his trail. As the Scout put it, "a spot of bother when something didn't work out quite right".

He had no rations, no water and a limited supply of ammunition. But his fieldcraft and survival training at Wafa Wafa helped him win through.

These are the men the terrorists want out of the way, men who are justifiably proud of their official motto - **Pamwe Chete, Together Only.**

Editor: The breakdown and build-up training technique used for the training of the Selous Scouts appears to be very similar to that used by the Portuguese for the training of their Comandos.

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