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#### Cover Picture:

*South Africa's Rooivalk Helicopter. A demonstration of Rooivalk weapons systems was held at the Overberg Test Range. The weapons test was organised by Denel(Pty)Limited and Atlas Aviation, and a detailed report of the test will appear in the following issue of Armed Forces.*

# Russian Tanks in Rhodesia:

## The Raid that Never Was

By Adam Geibel

To most observers, it's hard to imagine tanks—even friendly ones—having a positive impact on usually stealthy commando missions. But for one planned Rhodesian SAS operation, a handful of tanks would have meant the difference between overwhelming victory and the political defeat that turned Rhodesia into today's Zimbabwe.

Like most tales of intrigue in sub-Saharan Africa, this one starts years earlier and far to the north in a communist-held country. In 1974, Libya received an unknown number of Polish-made T-55's<sup>(1)</sup>, part of what would become the world's largest stockpile of Soviet weapons outside of the USSR.

In 1978, while the Rhodesian Army was hunting ZANLA and ZIPRA<sup>(2)</sup> guerillas, their neighbour Idi Amin Dada picked a fight with his Tanzanian neighbours. The war did not go well for the Ugandans and by the end of the year, the Tanzanians were on the offensive. Early in 1979, Amin ordered 10 T-55's from his Libyan friends.

The tanks, along with a quantity of spare parts and 150 tons of ammunition, were despatched from Libya on board the French freighter, *Astor*. The French firm of Marseilles-Fret handled the delivery arrangements. Unfortunately for Amin, the *Astor* reached Mombasa on April 11, 1979—the day Kampala fell to the Tanzanian Army and the Ugandan Liberation Forces under LTC Oyite-Ojok.

Apparently confusion reigned aboard both the ship and in the home office for the next few days. The *Astor* was ordered to Angola and made the incredible mistake of stopping in Durban to take on fuel and water. God knows what the folks at Marseilles-Fret or the *Astor's* captain was thinking.

Only three years prior, the SADF had pulled out of Angola (Hastily in some cases!) under a barrage of Cuban Katyusha rockets. The border conflict for Namibia was just warming up, and the guerillas were operating out of Angola. South African authorities promptly impounded and confiscated the *Astor's* cargo.

One tank was sent to the South African firm responsible for tank production, Olifant Manufacturing Company, and a second



*A Soviet/Russian T-54/55 tank similar to those that are reported in this article as having been supplied by South Africa to the Rhodesian Army.*

was shipped to the SADF School of Armour near Tempe for evaluation. In October, the remaining eight tanks were shipped to Rhodesia's Inkomo Barracks, outside Salisbury—allegedly under a veil of secrecy—tarpaulins and darkness.

Known as "E" Squadron, the tank unit was originally commanded by Captain Rolf Kaufelt, with SGM Riley and staffed by volunteers<sup>(3)</sup>. Integration of the Tank Squadron into the Rhodesian Defence Forces, which, prior to this, had not fielded main battle tanks, was originally supervised by SADF personnel (allegedly trained in Israel). When the SADF had to leave Rhodesia, a cadre from Armoured Car Regiment continued the gunner and driver training, as well as basic armour tactics and anti-aircraft drills.

Shortly after the arrival of the tanks, Zambia started making warlike noises, and the tanks were trotted out as part of a pys-ops charade. Covered with tarpaulins and loaded upon tank transporters, the 55's were driven around and around Salisbury's streets. The oldest military charade had been successfully executed once again; one media source later reported that Rhodesia possessed at least 20 tanks, as well as the prevailing rumour that they had been captured from a Mozambican base<sup>(4)</sup>.

Not only did such a ruse sound logical in light of several Rhodesian cross-border operations, but it covered the real trail of the tanks. Such a cover story also made the Rhodesian Forces look better (thereby boosting friendly morale) and their enemies even more incompetent. To a European Army—even in 1979—the T-54/55 series was almost an antique; a slow beast, with thin armour, an unimpressive main gun, and crude fire control equipment. The Soviet Union even stopped production that year. But in Africa, such a thing could become a monster in the right hands.

But the windfall came too late. By the time the crews had been trained sufficiently and the tanks painted to match the rest of the Rhodesian Armoured Force, the diplomatic talks at Lancaster House in London made the firepower of these tanks a moot point<sup>(5)</sup>. Operations were winding down. Between September 10 and December 15, 1979, the various factions managed to work out an agreement on three objectives: the terms of a Zimbabwean Constitution, a return to "legality" and a cease-fire. Elections would be held in February 1980 and closely supervised. By December 21, the Cease-fire Agreement was in effect and swarms of reporters (including a fair number of masquerading Eastern Bloc secret agents), as well as Australian, British, Nigerian and Fijian observers, were flown in to ensure a fair campaign.

The events in London didn't sit to well with everyone back in Rhodesia. A plot was hatched at the highest levels to ensure that Robert Mugabe never took power, even if he were to win the election. Not only would Mugabe be eliminated, but the ZANLA hierarchy and several key ZANU headquarters units would be taken in the same operation.

Joshua Nkomo, the less objectionable head of the ZAPU, would then be left to head a coalition government. The clandestine part—Operation Hectic—would take care of Mugabe and other key personnel, while the overt half—Operation Quartz—would use air power and other heavy weapons to eliminate major targets in Salisbury and around the country.

Part of the Lancaster House agreement created assembly points where guerillas had gathered by the thousands; nice easy targets. Other guerillas, primarily key leaders and headquarters units, had taken up residence in Salisbury proper.

Elements of regular and reserve Rhodesian Army were already in place throughout Salisbury, monitoring pre-election activity and "keeping the peace". SAS members had only to don the uniforms of Reservists to be able to reconnoitre to their hearts content. After extensive snooping, the following plan materialised. While the SAS "A" Squadron would kill Mugabe in Mount Pleasant and supporters in two other suburban houses in Belevdere South, "B" Squadron would kill Vice-President Simon Muzenda in Highlands, as well as a 100-man ZANLA contingent at the ZANU Headquarters in the nearby Medical Arts Centre<sup>(6)</sup>.

Captain Bob McKenna's "C" Squadron was tasked to take out the toughest target—200 ZIPRA and ZANLA men with their commanders. Res Nhongo (ZANLA), Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Musikas (both ZIPRA). Not only was this unit in a defensible building of the University of Rhodesia also surrounded by a two meter high brick wall—but the ZIPRA members were supposedly "in on" the coup. Since ZIPRA was the "good guy" organisation secretly slated to lead a coalition government, they would have to be allowed the opportunity to surrender.

These Rhodesian light forces would be aided by the heaviest direct fire support ever afforded them throughout the war. In addition to a 20mm cannon and the RPG's, MG's and personnel weapons of the SAS teams, the mission would have the support of the tank squadron and Armoured Car Regiment. The Rhodesians were even prepared to pull out their last surprise—

106mm Recoiless Rifles, usually kept as an anti-tank reserve.

While the 90mm guns of the Eland Armoured Cars and the 106mm Recoiless would reduce "A" and "B" Squadrons objectives, the 100mm guns of the 55's would pound the Visual Arts Building to rubble. The 20mm, the 7.62mm Coax's and 12.7mm DHSK AA guns would discourage any RPG return fire. "E" Squadron made its last stealthy move. The tanks were put on low-loaders and covered with canvas, then moved to a forward assembly area at the King George VI Barracks.

Rehearsals for this mission were the most extensive of the entire war and were conducted at Kabrit Barracks. The planning was just as thorough: communications while inside the target, ammunition resupply, medevac and replacements, even precautions for fighting fires. Intelligence had managed to pinpoint every RPG and MG the guerillas had inside the building.

It would take "C" Squadron two minutes to throw a cordon around the building. At H+4 min., the tanks would arrive from their hidden battle position. McKenna would use a loudspeaker to give anyone inside the University the option of surrendering. All of the ZIPRA fellows would promptly scurry out, while the ZANLA terrorists prepared to fight to the death. Then the tanks would open up to essentially point-blank range. In that short time, the Squadron would send approximately 80 High Explosive rounds into the target.

After two minutes of preparatory fire from all of the heavy weapons, a single tank, its fragile front fenders removed so as not to trap track-fouling debris, was to ram the security wall around the University. The SAS teams would then use the breach to rush the objective and sweep each room, marking their progress with sheets draped from the windows of cleared rooms. The entry teams had full body armour, AK's and copies of the British stun grenade that had served the 22 SAS so well during the Iranian Embassy crisis in London.

All things being equal, Mugabe and his key people would be dead before most of Salisbury's citizens had finished their morning coffee and the mess would be cleaned up before the morning rush hour.

Thus prepared, the SAS patiently waited every day for the code-word...and waited...and waited...like some tragic tale of the ancient Greeks.

The election results were announced on March 4, but the order never came, and

the guns stayed silent. Mugabe was the new Prime Minister and his party held 57 out of the 100 parliament seats. Insiders fully expected a violent reaction from the Rhodesian Forces, but the only screaming in Salisbury came from the celebrating ZANLA supporters. By April 18, the nation was officially the Republic of Zimbabwe.

Amidst the depressed, frustrated troops, the oft-repeated question was "Why?". And like any army, the rumours spread like a virus.

The first theory: The story that came down the chain of command was that the mission had been compromised, that Mugabe's people had found out (what else would one expect, as it was necessary to tell the ZIPRA people that had to share the barracks space with ZANLA at the University?).

Could any one of the target sights have survived such an onslaught of firepower? Hardly. But the overall results of *Quartz* might have been less than spectacular—Mugabe and company had slipped *mujibas*—mere supporters—into the assembly areas while the real terrorists roamed the countryside, intimidating voters.

The second theory, favoured by the SAS Co, LTC Garath Barret: The coup was compromised from someone at the upper planning levels who was suspected of being on a foreign payroll.

Long before the election, the SAS had planned to get Mugabe and many opportunities had been denied outright. Luck worthy of Mr MaGoo followed Mugabe whenever missions were approved. A Radio-controlled bomb missed at an election rally in Victoria and Mugabe blew off a press meeting in Bulawayo—where there were two ambushes set. A March 2 plan to use a SA-7 to zap an airliner with Mugabe and a ZANU committee, was also scrubbed at the last minute.

The third theory: Nkomo felt that he couldn't have the government handed to him by the whites. Since the whole operation was to support a Nkomo coalition government, such a position made any effort moot.

The fourth and most cynical theory: The plan was never seriously considered by the highest echelons, but was allowed to be developed in order to keep the Rhodesian Armed Forces occupied and under control. Left to their own devices, the troops would have been more than capable and willing to take out Mugabe.

Apparently the politicians and generals' line of thinking went as follows: Thousands of communist guerillas were already inside the country while across the borders, the armies of Mozambique (remember FRELIMO?) Zambia and Tanzania (fresh from its victory over Amin's Ugandan rabble) would be waiting like buzzards. Individually, no single opponent could predict a clear victory over the Rhodesian Army, but all of them responding at the same time—even if poorly coordinated—might make for a different story. The communist's would have also assuredly had the backing of the infamous "World Opinion".

The only outcome of such a fight would have been massive civilian casualties, both black and white. Subsequent plans to engineer another anti-Mugabe coup after the election all came to the same conclusion—they had missed their chance. Any action would have cost too many lives, both military and civilian and Mugabe's people had already incarcerated several suspected of plotting against the new regime.

Whatever the case, the high degree of discipline in the SAS that had served professionally and with honour during the war, was relegated to the history books. A 1981

article on the Zimbabwean Order of Battle by *Armed Forces Journal* indicated that the squadron of T-55's had been integrated with the Armoured Car Squadrons to form an Armoured Regiment<sup>(7)</sup>. In the decade since then, Zimbabwe might have acquired as many as another seven T-54/55's (depending upon which source you believe) and, more believably, 35 type 59 MBT's—the Chinese copy of the T-54. <sup>(8)</sup>.

#### References:

1. The "L" suffix is not a usual NATO or WARSAW Pact designation, though it could refer to Polish Army tank factory near Labedy. The tanks in this lot had a substantial mix of '54 & '55 components. South African National Museum of Military History Archives.
2. The guerilla alphabet soup in Rhodesia needs an explanation. The Zimbabwean National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was the military wing of Mugabe's Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU). The Zimbabwean People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) was the military arm of Nkomo's Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU).
3. *Rebel in Rhodesia*, Michael Pierce, P. 28, Jan. 82 SOF.
4. Pg 113, Chimuenga! The War in Rhodesia

65-80, Moorcroft & McLaughlan, Marshalltown: Sygma/Collins 1982.

5. See photo in Dec 81, SOF, Pg 39 \, Pierce.
6. Cole, B. *The Elite*. The Story of the Rhodesian Special Air Service, Pg. 413 to 420.
7. A 1983 Country Study by The American University noted the arrival of ten former North Korean T-54's in 1981, along with over 100 advisers and 10 Libyan T-34's diverted from Uganda. Hmm...This sounds like two fairy tales growing from one reality.
8. *Dirty Little Secrets* & The Statesman's Yearbook 90-91, John Paxton.



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*Rhodesian troops preparing for an airborne operation.*

