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MASTERS OF THE IRREGULAR BATTLEFIELD : RHODESIA'S MILITARY AND SECURITY FORCES (1965-1979)

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Exercise Solo Flight

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MASTERS OF THE IRREGULAR BATTLEFIELD: RHODESIA'S MILITARY AND SECURITY FORCES (1965-1979)

The bitter and divisive civil war that occurred in the former British colony of Rhodesia, and in what is now known as the nation of Zimbabwe, serves as a textbook example of a counter-insurgency campaign, and at its core typifies the very foundational characteristics of what strategist and tacticians' have termed *Irregular*, or in a more recent variation *Hybrid warfare*. A highly trained, motivated, and innovative Rhodesian security establishment held its own and excelled in its military efforts to dominate the operational environment against, not one, but two separate nationalist liberation movements, both influenced by communist ideals, that challenged it on the battlefield. Regardless, the courage and professionalism of the Rhodesian military and security services was not enough to quell the winds of political and societal change, and ultimately the futile armed struggle lead to a sealed fate which has seen the short-lived Rhodesian republic relegated to history. However, by serving as a highlighted example of adaptability and innovation, this paper will demonstrate how through its proficiency and lethality-at-arms, the Rhodesian armed services possessed the characteristics and skill required to excel at irregular and hybrid warfare, and to this day serve are a model for those professional militaries faced with the multi-dimensional counter-insurgency dilemma.

The term *Irregular warfare* is widely accepted to be as defined by the United States Department of Defense in its joint doctrine as "*a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations*"¹. This basic definition has been expanded upon in recent years with the addition of the concept of *Hybrid Warfare*, as this

¹ United States Department of Defense. "Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept (JOC)", Version 1.0, 27 February 2009.

style of non-conventional conflict is being more frequently referred to in present day parlance. This utilization of the term *Hybrid* warfare from simply *Irregular* warfare is caused to a large extent by the inclusion of technological innovations combined with an ever-increasing networked and inter-connected world. The variation from the base definition is as succinctly defined by Robert Wilkie being, “*conflict in which states or non-state actors exploit all modes of war simultaneously by using advanced conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and disruptive technologies or criminality to destabilize an existing order*”². These definitions are applicable to the armed conflict that occurred in Rhodesia and along its borders with its neighbouring countries during the period of 1965-1979. They establish a framework of understanding to the conflict in which the Rhodesian military and security forces clearly outperformed and dominated both Robert Mugabe’s, Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and Joshua Nkomo’s, Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) through the innovation and mastery of intelligence, battlefield mobility, and the lethal application of firepower.

Both ZANLA and ZIPRA being the armed wings of nationalist movements that were vying for ultimate control in what was Rhodesia, understood that they could not defeat the Rhodesian security apparatus in open battle, no matter how small a military force it truly was (*with an operational effective strength that fluctuate throughout the conflict, but never exceeded 60,000 military and police fielded at one time*), and thus individually attempted to avoid Rhodesian military strength and turned to a gradual and phased approach to conflict that sought

² Wilkie, Robert. "Hybrid Warfare: Something Old, Not Something New." *Air and Space Power Journal* XXIII, no. 4 (Winter 2009), pg.14.

to utilize a basic principle of irregular warfare, isolation³. That isolation of the adversary from the civilian population and the generation of popular dissatisfaction towards the ruling power being the avenues to victory⁴. In the most basic of forms they utilized political influence and infiltration within the domestic landscape, and simultaneously sowed the conditions that sustained diplomatic isolation for the former colony as its minority-controlled government made efforts towards its own vision of independence. The insurgent efforts were most certainly not contained to the political spectrum. The use of violence was seen as a necessary and justifiable tool, and this included such common *Irregular and Hybrid Warfare* instruments as acts of terrorism, sabotage, and intimidation against civilian targets. As well, in an effort to establish their legitimacy and ultimately ensure control once national power was attained, the nationalist movements both established organizational structures to affect the build-up of what would become conventional military forces. These preparations and the necessary bases of operation were predominantly established outside of the territorial boundaries of Rhodesia in an attempt to permit the most secure and favourable conditions. This would not deter, nor prove to be militarily effective against the professional capacity and abilities of the Rhodesian's.

So, what were the ingredients that made the Rhodesian's such a formidable fighting force? The Rhodesian military and security forces viewed the conflict as a matter of national survival and were faced with multiple factors that placed severe limitations on their available resources, and thus conventionally acceptable military options to respond and react. These included such major constraints as an internationally sanctioned arms embargo, a small and

³ Moorcraft and McLaughlin. "The Rhodesian War- A Military History". Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, USA, 2008, pg. 47.

⁴ Freedman, Sir Lawrence. "Regular and Irregular War." *Strategic Datalink*, no. 1 (August 2008)

shrinking population as a recruiting base, and eventually geographical isolation at being surrounded on three borders (operational fronts) with Mozambique's eventual independence from the former and passive ally of Portugal in 1975⁵. These operational conditions generated a necessary flexibility and level of resourcefulness that are crucial for operational success on the battlefield when faced with such a non-conventional and irregular threat.

Although established as a conventional military and security force (organizational structure, equipment, roles, etc.) as well as being predominantly infused with British military tradition and Western military standards of operation, the Rhodesian forces quickly adapted to both operational and tactical necessity posed by the conflict. They displayed an appreciation for the *irregular* threat posed by the nationalist insurgency and rapidly adapted their structures, tactics, and techniques to confront the onslaught. The Rhodesian command and control apparatus were topped off by a civilian lead Ministerial War Council, supported by a National Operations Coordinating Committee (OCC), which consisted of the necessary representatives from the national Civil-Military leadership to affect a national security and defence strategy. However, it was within the confines of the operational level that the flexibility and adaptability of the Rhodesian forces command and control structure was apparent and shone through. To ensure the most efficient use of limited resources, rapid information sharing, and to permit a streamlined conduit for the passage of orders to units in the field, the Rhodesians utilized a model of a Joint Operational Command (JOC) command construct, in which these dispersed operational command and control nodes were responsible for specific operational areas, in which the country was divided. It was within the JOCs that local operations were conducted within the broader framework of a national strategy. The JOCs were typically commanded by an Army Brigadier,

⁵ Moorcraft and McLaughlin. "The Rhodesian War- A Military History". Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, USA, 2008.

who set priorities for deploying combat troops (often by way of the “*Fire Force*” concept of rapid and lethal airmobile/airborne deployment), coordinated force protection efforts for vital infrastructure and populations, as well as maintained responsibility for civil-affairs activities and the maintenance of critical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, railways, etc.⁶.

The Rhodesian security force was comprised of the following key elements at the height of the conflict in the mid-1970s⁷:

- The ***British South Africa Police*** (BSAP), which included specialist units such as the Police Anti-Terror Unit (PATU) and the Special Intelligence Branch. This national police force, including its para-military sub-elements never exceed 8000 regular members. However, there was a Police Reserve and Guard Force whose composition was primarily made up of older national service (conscripts) and volunteers, who were charged with static defence and local security tasks;
- The ***Rhodesian Army*** being the backbone of the Rhodesian security apparatus and comprised all elements one would expect in a modern 20th century military force. The small Rhodesian Army structure consisted of a Headquarters, four infantry brigades, and a Special Forces headquarters, with various training schools and supporting units. The army contained such notable and respected units as; the Selous Scouts, the Rhodesian Special Air Service (RSAS), The Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI), Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR), and the independent companies of the Rhodesia Regiment (RR). This utilitarian and highly professional force composed of no more than 11,000 Regulars and 40,000 Reservists at any one time throughout its existence; and

⁶ Ibid, pg. 60.

⁷ Rhodesian Security Forces, Wikipedia, 2019.

- The *Rhodesian Airforce* (RhAF), a small but very capable service was composed of a mixed bag on antiquated and outdated platforms during the civil war, and at its peak numbered no more than 2300 personnel of whom only 150 were pilots. However, as a matter of both necessity and adaptability, these pilots were trained to operate multiple aircraft and were critical to the operational effectiveness and lethality of the Rhodesian security forces on the battlefield⁸.

Although, small in numbers this joint force could produce some of the most lethal, innovative, and effective combat forces witnessed on a modern battlefield. By way of utilizing all available resources, both in equipment and personnel at their disposal, the Rhodesian military and security forces were able to keep their external adversaries at bay, until such time as political forces brought about the inevitable fate for many units of these services, be they of absorption in to the service of a new country or disbandment to the annals of history.

The Rhodesian approach to battle was one fought with an eye towards information dominance through collection, analysis, and rapid decision-making process, all in combination with a fluid, mobile, and lethal kinetic response. Excellence in small unit tactics and operations was a strength of both military and police elements. Initially, the Rhodesian strategy was defensive in nature and focussed upon establishing a defensive perimeter around its own borders and key territory, identifying infiltration by nationalist elements, and subsequently isolating and neutralizing any threat. This basic strategy changed out of necessity around 1972, when an increasing amount of attacks and infiltrations were being launched against both civilian and security targets from across international borders with the perpetrators subsequently retreating to

⁸ Moorcraft and McLaughlin. "The Rhodesian War- A Military History". Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, USA, 2008, pg.62.

perceived safe havens, vice remaining within Rhodesia⁹. It was at this point in the conflict that the operational focus transformed from one primarily centered on defensive operations with an intent to delay and buy time, to one assuming an offensive flavour meant to dissuade and eradicate the enemy, no matter what side of the border he was found on.

As stated, the Rhodesian security forces were predominantly modelled on conventional military and police structures. However, as stated above it was through operational necessity that it adapted and developed some of the most innovative and effective means of countering an irregular war by seizing the initiative, and thus turning the irregularity of the conflict to its advantage. There are a plethora of examples, whether they be based upon tactics, techniques, or technical innovation that typify the Rhodesian's excellence and dominance on the battlefield, but I will draw attention to the top three that I opine were the crucial methods and enablers that permitted the Rhodesian's to soundly out perform their adversaries.

The first would be an appreciation of the geography of the battlespace, in combination with an acceptance of the internal resource limitations of the security forces. By effectively permitting forward deployment and basing of their limited forces in a decentralized manner across the country, in concert with establishing a flexible command and control system through its JOCs, the Rhodesian's nurtured a mission command mindset at both the operational and tactical levels. This dispersed approach, which tended to use locally sourced security forces (some such as the independent infantry companies of the Rhodesia Regiment) with intimate knowledge of the terrain and population, also greatly enhanced the information collection, management, and intelligence dominance so crucial to the counter-insurgency threat¹⁰.

⁹ Ibid, pg.62

¹⁰ Baxter, Peter. "Bush War Rhodesia 1966-1980". Thirty Degrees South Publishers, South Africa, 2015, pg. 37.

The second area in which the innovation and expertise of the Rhodesian security forces came to prominence resides within the realm of tactical employment of resources. Specifically, the concept of the “*Fire Force*”, with its rapid deployment, vertical envelopment, and ultimate neutralization of an enemy threat. This concept involved the use of forward deployed light infantry forces, co-located with the intimate mobility afforded by helicopters and transport aircraft, operating in concert and supported by the firepower and observation capacity of attack aircraft and additional armed helicopters, the capability to be rapidly deployed and inserted to effect a cordon which would contain any adversarial threat, and ultimately neutralize it. This tactical concept working together with an effective field intelligence network, and both air and ground-based reconnaissance elements proved a true force multiplier. With small, robust and highly mobile forces that were rapidly deployable, the Rhodesian effectively dominated the battlespace, and kept their enemy off balance¹¹. The tactical innovation of the “Fire Force” has become synonymous with the war in Rhodesia, and its effective and lethal tactical employment was only ever restricted by the limitation of resources the Rhodesian security forces faced.

The third critical enabler to the Rhodesian’s battlefield success resides within its home-grown unconventional and special forces units. Namely such famously lethal and effective units as the Rhodesian Special Air Service Regiment (RhSAS), The Selous Scouts, the Special Branch, and the commandos of the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI). These professional, highly motivated, and combat proven units were the cornerstone to the Rhodesian war effort. The operational flexibility, limited restrictions towards the means of their employment, and their sheer dependability, permitted the Rhodesian’s to unleash a lethal implement of battle that the

¹¹ Richard, Wood. “Counter-Strike from the Sky- The Rhodesian Fireforce in the War in the Bush 1974-1980”. Thirty Degrees South Publishers, South Africa, 2009, pg.96.

adversary could not withstand. Although relatively lightly equipped to permit mobility, all these units utilized components of what could be characterized as hybrid-tactics and equipment, which speaks to both innovation and necessity. However, another common feature to the operational methods of these native organizations, was their effective use of terrain. That being both their natural physical surroundings and the human component of terrain (which included intimate knowledge of the various tribal cultures and languages). Through the appropriate selection of members, robust task-tailored training, as well as the development of specialized equipment and tactics, each of these units were designed to defeat the insurgency through direct offensive intervention. The amount of respect, and fear that these Rhodesian units earned across the African continent is best demonstrated in a comment made by the Malawian President, Hastings Banda in 1976, when member states from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) were discussing the potential to intervene and forcibly settle the matter of Rhodesian independence. He was heard stating in a laughing voice that, “*just ten Rhodesian mercenaries’, could whip five thousand African soldiers*”¹². There can be no denying the combat effectiveness and efficiency of Rhodesia’s premier military and security units.

In conclusion, the Rhodesian conflict of 1965-1979 is a textbook example of a counter-insurgency campaign, and at its core typifies the very foundational characteristics of what strategist and tacticians’ have traditionally termed a style of *Irregular*, or as utilized today to describe examples of current and forecasted conflicts, *Hybrid* warfare. As stated by Frank Hoffman, a chief proponent of the concept of hybrid warfare, “the future places a high premium

¹² Baxter, Peter. “Bush War Rhodesia 1966-1980”. Thirty Degrees South Publishers, South Africa, 2015, pg. 36.

on forces that are versatile, agile, adaptable, and expeditionary minded”¹³, and the Rhodesian Security Forces were well suited for the conflict of their day, and characteristically remain relevant in the current conflict environment where the appropriate application of lethal force is crucial towards achieving operational success. A small but highly trained and motivated Rhodesian security establishment dominated the operational environment and excelled in its efforts on the battlefield through innovation, adaptation, and skill-at-arms. The Rhodesian security forces exemplify the necessary lethality, skill, and leadership to serve as a model of how to succeed on the battlefield when faced with the operational challenges posed by an irregular or hybrid style of warfare. To this day, the Rhodesian’s are a tangible example of effective warfighting security forces for those professional militaries faced with the multi-dimensional dilemma of a counter-insurgency conflict.

¹³ Wilkie, Robert. "Hybrid Warfare: Something Old, Not Something New." *Air and Space Power Journal* XXIII, no. 4 (Winter 2009), pg.14.

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