

QUESTIONS FOR EX-RHODESIAN COMBATANTS: REPLY BY J.C.W. AUST LT COL. RTD. RHODESIAN ARMY (RLI)

BACK GROUND INFORMATION

1. I was born educated and brought up in Southern Rhodesia. My maternal grandfather and his brother were Rhodesian pioneers. The former fought in the Matabele Rebellion whilst the latter fought in the Matabele War of 1893. He died on the Shangani River when Allan Wilson and his detachment of 33 men were surrounded by the Matabele and massacred – a battle which is remembered as “Wilson’s Last Stand”. I am in possession of both BSA Company campaign medals. My grandmother (nee Borrowdale Bell) and her family entered Rhodesia on the first ever train to Bulawayo in 1897. My grandfather purchased a farm in Matabeleland in 1922 and commenced productive farming in 1932. My mother was born in 1910. Her brother, my uncle, served in 266 (Rhodesia) Fighter Squadron. He died, due to an accident, near Duxford, UK. It is also worth noting that 3 of my grandmother’s brothers served in the British Army, in France, during WWI.
2. My father was born in Reading Berks, UK, in 1908. He emigrated to South Africa in 1929 and moved to Rhodesia in 1930 and served 20 years in the BSAP – the British South Africa Police.
3. I was brought up in various BSAP Police ‘Camps’ (rural police stations) and early life in that environment remains embedded in my mind. My close friends were the three sons of our African cook who was employed (together with his wife) by the family and accompanied us throughout Father’s service at various camps – Gutu, Fort Victoria (twice) Nyati, Umvuma. These “homes” were replaced by a mud brick cottage when we joined Grandfather and Granny on the farm in 1950. I attended REPS – Rhodes Estate Preparatory School – and Plumtree School. The former was situated on the edge of the Matopo Hills, the latter on the border with Botswana. Both establishments were for boys only and were set in classic bush areas of Rhodesia. These environments initiated a never ending love of the bush, the outdoors, wildlife and the wonder of nature – a scenario worth fighting for.
4. I attended an Officer Selection Course in late 1961, having completed National Service training at the age of 17. I chose to attend an officer Training Course in Rhodesia rather than to attend RMA Sandhurst in the UK (which was the choice of many Rhodesians over the years. Several Swords of Honour were awarded to Rhodesian Sandhurst cadets over the years.) I was eventually commissioned into the Rhodesian African Rifles in 1962 in which I served for 3 years. (Note RAR/RNR war history: WWI and WWII). I joined the Army due to an in-born love of military love engendered by an upbringing in Police Camps and a never failing respect for all my relatives who had fought for the Empire. REPS and Plumtree Schools also had an effect in that rigorous military discipline and cadet training formed part of school life in those days. Remembrance Day was revered.

(Addition: *All of us had to do National Service training. You commenced at the youngest age of 17, did 4 ½ months training, at Llewellyn Barracks. I volunteered to do it when I left school. I got a job in a bank for a year, and applied to attend Selection Course which was quite hard. It lasted 5 days, there were 300 applicants, they selected 32 and 7 of us ended up passing out after 1 year and five months of rigorous training. That is a reflection of how tough it was. It was modelled on the English system. (A lot of Rhodesians asked to go to Sandhurst.) I came back to the Federal Army, and having passed out of my training course, joined the RAR, where I served for three years. I was then posted to the school of Infantry at Gwelo, where I spent three years as an instructor. I went from there to a Staff Appointment at HQ2 Brigade, Salisbury, and, from there, was posted to 1RLI.*

The RLI was very different to the RAR. This was not on racial grounds. I was a Commando Commander (a Commando comprised 100-odd men, and there were 4 commandos in a battalion.) I was commanding one when the war was hotting up. I joined in 1972, and left at the end of 1975. I then went back to the Joint Planning Staff (which included Commanders of the BSAP, Army and Intelligence. We met once a week, and I was one of the Administrative Staff, who took the minutes of this meeting. I did two years there, and was sent back to the RLI. I did another two years as Battalion Second-in-Command then commanded the School of Infantry for a year, finally returning to 1RLI as the War was ending, and was the last Commander of the RLI.

I married into that Battalion. It became my parent regiment. In 1998 we had an RAR reunion in Bulawayo. I attended that and met up with several old soldiers that I had served with many years before. They were wonderful men.

Q. The African soldier? Why did they fight, do you think?

You have to remember the African soldiers from Rhodesia who fought in WWI, - the Rhodesian Native Regiment. There were traditional recruiting areas, where service in the army was common, within families. It was a job which gave good security and for those days, good pay and a free uniform, food and housing.

I remember attending a meeting with the chiefs. They ended by saying, ‘Let us go forward together. We need to improve education.’ But there were a lot of people with hang-ups about the Blacks. There is a natural custom within African nations that rule is measured by forceful discipline. You rule in a dictatorial manner. It is deeply embedded in their culture, where we were the way the things were going, that was a big fear among whites. Once that culture broke out it would be disaster. We had many sensible, well-balanced people in the army, and government. But look at Robert Mugabe. He is communist trained. He served time in jail. As the war unrolled their hatred against ZIPRA/ZANLA – terrorists as they were called. It got into your brain that this was evil.

AS COMBATANTS

5. I was brought up to respect and admire the British Empire and Commonwealth. The Federal Army of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland was a fitting example of loyalty to Queen and Country. All Regiments had served the Commonwealth with distinction. With the demise of the Federation and the beginning of the Terrorist War my

loyalty to the country of my birth strengthened: my loyalty, if not my respect for Britain weakened due to the apparent lack of understanding of ‘who’ and ‘what’ we were facing.

We were fighting for civilisation, for realistic progress benefiting all and for logical education and development. We did not accept the post-war policy of granting independence to African countries who we knew had not the mind, matter or experience required to make meaningful progress for their people. We were aware of traditional African culture which had changed little, despite the Empire/Commonwealth years: a culture based on rule by a chosen few and imposed through fearful force. Rhodesia was not ready for independence/majority rule. It was necessary to educate, to introduce joint political vision cooperation and purpose. We were not ‘anti-black’; we were realistic. Our country was then known as ‘the Bread Basket of Africa’, a country fit to illustrate the true value of educated and sensible growth, of progress by Black and White together. We, who had been brought up in Africa retained an instinctive (and accurate) distrust of ‘Black African Rule’. All thoughts were reinforced by the deep ingrained love we had for our land.

6. We took up arms against a Guerrilla/terrorist army who initiated the war. ZIPRA and ZANLA received support from Communist Russia and Communist China respectively. Did the world, the ‘free world’ not understand this?! Within days of the initial invasions of our land they illustrated the tactics of sheer terrorism against both Black and White Rhodesian citizens. We quickly realised that, should they gain power, our country would degenerate into a land of disaster. They were neither qualified nor sufficiently advanced in civilised culture to rule a country. The ethos of leaders was unchanged from that of the distant past. We understood what defeat would bring. The word ‘we’ refers to both Black and White soldiers of the Rhodesian Army. We were never politically indoctrinated and never received political lectures or lessons. With friends, comrades and families of course we discussed politics and the situation. We were not subjected to ‘brain washing’ or any form of political indoctrination.
7. Regular soldiers retained a deep understanding. An understanding generated by ‘knowing your enemy’ – a necessity for all front line troops. Regular situation reports and intelligence reports kept us all briefed. The Cold War environment of those days reinvigorated our beliefs. It is of interest to note that the ranks of the Rhodesian African Rifles were made up of extremely well-trained and well-committed Black soldiers as were the ranks of several other units. Some 14 different nationalities served in the Rhodesian Light Infantry.

Q. Is it fair to call these soldiers from outside Rhodesia ‘mercenaries’? Why did they fight along side you? How were they recruited?

8. The relatively small white population of Rhodesia demanded that we welcomed any volunteers who wished to serve in our Forces. Applicants were accepted from many countries. At the end of the War in 1980, there were no less than 14 different nationalities serving in the Rhodesian Light Infantry – English, French, American etc.

9. The War undoubtedly created a strong ‘Rhodesian Identity’. A firm culture developed as war progressed: ‘Rhodie’ songs, beloved radio programmes designed for those in the bush; a Rhodie ‘slang’ based on that used in regular Army Units (‘We will fight through thick and thin’)
10. I had travelled to South Africa as a child on holiday several times. I visited the UK on holiday in 1967 just as the first violence which preceded the real terrorist war commenced. I visited Father’s family for the first time. All appeared to fully understand our predicament in Rhodesia and throughout my travels I was never castigated for my country’s politics.
11. There were Black Rhodesians serving in various Government and military units/ organisations. Many Black people were employed in various professions by White people. Relationships were invariably close and meaningful. It must be understood that many, many Africans served with outstanding loyalty and outstanding bravery – and many were awarded decorations for bravery and truly professional conduct. There was and never will be any familiarity between them and terrorists. In my various operational and staff postings I gained a clear and detailed picture of the African serviceman, his family and his friends. They were loyal faithful people. It was a war of civilised, logical, aspiration against an enemy who campaigned for power irrespective of modern democracy – a campaign engineered by a lust for power and supremacy. A study of the unspeakable atrocities committed by ZANLA /ZIPRA will effectively illustrate the nature of our enemy.

LEAVING

12. I LEFT Zimbabwe in December 1980 after the cessation of conflict and moved to South Africa. I returned in 1991 to an apparently calm and peaceful land to resurrect the family farm which I inherited. The farm had remained dormant for some time. Ten years later the farm (which had become a hugely successful enterprise) was forcibly removed from my possession and taken over by the Mugabe regime. My family had no choice but to leave the land of our birth. We remain eternally grateful to the British Government for its civilised culture in granting us benefits and a means of survival. I remain eternally grateful to my father who, when I was young, handed me a British passport and said: ‘You see this? Never ever lose it, no matter what happens where.’
I shall never forget my friends and comrades who gave up their lives in a war we won on the battlefield yet lost through misdirected politics.

But I cannot get Africa out of my body, my blood and my soul. I dream of it every day. How lucky we were. How lucky and how spoilt we were. Spoilt! It was in many ways, a tough life yet a very special one. We had servants, nannies and batmen who were all wonderful people. Our environment was special – a wonderful world of beautiful bush and amazing wildlife, wrapped in a climate of sub-tropical splendour. Alas, all is gone.