

Questions for ex-Rhodesian combatants – Neville Spurr

Background info:

1. Where were you born?

Salisbury Rhodesia

My Father emigrated from RSA to Rhodesia during the 1930`s recession.

I am now South African but only because my Zimbabwe passport expired and I had to obtain a travel document.

2. What were your family links with the UK?

My Grand Parents, on my Mothers side, were born in Sheffield UK and emigrated to RSA with the 1820 settlers, they were railway people.

With my mother being born in Mozambique whilst they were involved in the Beira to Umtali rail link.

Later my Grand Father was a station master at a variety of places in Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia.

My Grandparents on my Father`s side were from Lancashire, and came to Rhodesia to work in the cotton industry in the factories around Gatooma (David Whiteheads etc) via South Africa.

None of them ever rose to management positions and were factory workers their whole lives, they retired in the Gatooma area.

I obtained O levels from Churchill High School, Salisbury.

We were an average middle class white family.

3. Where did you consider to be ‘home’?

Rhodesia

4. What were your formative experiences?
(family/school/environment/peer group)

None of my family had ever been a policeman, although my Father served in the desert during the 2 nd WW.

My parents were totally against my joining the Police Force as it was not an “upmarket” position at the time, accountancy or law were more

preferable in their minds but as their funds did not extend to sponsoring me for those professions, and at 18 years old I had to find work of some sort and leave home.

5. What did you think of white immigration/immigrants (post war? Post 1965?)

If you mean people leaving Rhodesia for good, then I despised them and felt they were running away from a just cause and war, but also very sorry for them in having to adjust to an alien culture.

Those arriving from the UK in particular were regarded with some amusement as they did not appear to know how to re-act with African servants, even sharing meals at the same table with them, something unheard of in my youth, and generally spoiling them to our way of thinking.

To amplify on this attitude my parents never discussed Africans and were not interested in their culture, they never about race relations as far as I can recall.

Our domestic workers were paid fairly by the order of the day, their children's school fee's, uniforms, text books and medicals for their wife or wives etc. were paid for by the employer as a matter of course, and a small room at the bottom of the garden with running water and flush toilets were supplied as a matter of course.

Paternalism was encouraged by the Government of the day and even basic Shona booklets were issued along side the Chilapalapa (simplified Shona)

By the Government, in the main the words were used were those of a master to servant.

How did you view South Africa? And Afrikaner residents in Rhodesia?

We had on rare occasions visited South Africa, most of our holidays were in Mozambique.

When visiting SA we always thought the Africans we had dealings with usually domestics were sullen and not at all like the smiling and cheerful people we had at home.

Those living in Rhodesia tended to cling to their own communities and religions and fiercely fought for their language to be used at every opportunity, but were very hard workers especially in the agricultural field.

The white population of SA also seemed sullen, Calvinistic but very hard workers, who were not afraid to carry out manual labour unlike white Rhodesians of the time, who last did this type of work in the 1930`s recession.

At the time we respected Afrikaners for their determination to fight for their rights and the country they had developed.

We were not comfortable with the rigid apartheid in RSA and always regarded our African people as well educated, freer and seemed happier, then their counter parts in SA

Later in our war years I had a very poor impression of the SA Police who were sent to Rhodesia to help in the terrorist war.

They seemed more interested in getting their financial allowances for being away from home then in really getting to grips with the terrorist problem in Rhodesia, they appeared very mercenary without any loyalty to Rhodesia in my view.

6. When did you join BSAPolice or Reserve? Why did you join? What did your family think?

I joined the BSAP in 1963 because I was a very keen horseman and show jumper, greatly influenced by the various displays of horsemanship put on by the BSAP at the various agricultural shows in the country, and money was short, I needed a job.

My family thought I was mad, as the job was poorly paid and in general policemen were considered to have no career ambition and only joined because they could not find any other form of meaningful employment.

I hated the basic training and after that was sent to Wankie, Victoria Falls and Kazangula, where I was the only white with two African Constables.

My first shock was dealing with African policemen on an almost equal level, they knew more about police work then I did and they taught me how things were done.

Only then did I realise that in fact the African people had a culture and were just ordinary human beings as I was, there was no master and servant relationship in the Police, just one of doing the job together.

Although I was senior to them in pay and almost every other way, and was only a teenager the much older Police Constables did not seem to dislike this system, although I know I was the butt of many a joke amongst themselves, when making stupid mistakes, I never experienced any animosity from them.

After many years of being a policeman which I enjoyed with the advent of the war my role changed completely, with military training coming more to the fore, something I regretted as I enjoyed police work.

As combatants:

5. What/whom did you think you were fighting for?
What values/'standards'? (Western? European? British?)

I believed were in the front line of the fight against communism and the erosion of what I considered were "civilised" standards.

I was convinced that in spite of all the rhetoric the West were really siding with us against communist tide, after all we had great mineral wealth which both sides were keen on retaining.

What/whom did you think you were fighting against?

I honestly believed we were fighting for honesty and fair play for our people with ingrained "western" values.

I was disgusted by the brutal murders and maiming of what I considered to be normal law abiding African Rhodesians, with a minority of whites being targeted because they were soft targets and their deaths would be newsworthy internationally, whereas the African victims were marginalised by the press.

I believed that if a terrorist Government took over, we would be massacred, our churches closed down and our "civilisation" destroyed.

What formed your outlook?

Initially the many ritual murders for witch craft etc. that I had investigated, proving that some sectors of our community were not up to our level of civilisation.

Some very strange, in my view, ideas about the African spiritual world, and how no decision would be taken without reference to deceased ancestors, despite the obvious (to me) conclusion of the event.

Later, when the war started how these same beliefs were twisted and used with extreme violence by the terrorists against their own people as I witnessed from the many criminal cases involving mutilation, removal of lips and ears, cooking them and making relatives eat them.

The brutal and public murders of Government employees in front of the children and other kraal dwellers.

Using land mines which killed bus travellers, private vehicles but also security force members.

The Viscount aircraft being shot down, the murder of the survivors and the Elim Mission mission massacres left an indelible impression on me as to what we were fighting against.

Media/friends/music/religion?

The media in the form of newspapers and magazines which in general offered high praise to the Rhodesian Front Government and the defence force activities (and as I was a member of the defence force) I enjoyed the praise and the belief we were fighting the good fight.

The radio played a great part in my life as we could hear it everywhere at little cost, every time the announcement "Security Force Headquarters regret to announce the death in action of " I invariably know some of the names on the list, this made me even more determined to fight on.

Was there political indoctrination/regular discussions from your commanding officers

I was never exposed to any deliberate political indoctrination or regular discussions by my senior officers, we were always told to remain apolitical and to serve the Government of the day.

I never recall any senior officer denigrating any African because of his belief system and structures, but they like me wondered how they could support rapists and murderers.

When my contemporaries or senior officers left the force and emigrated I always felt let down and secretly felt they were cowards and deserting a just cause, I would boycott wherever possible farewell parties of these people.

Political discussions with your mates?

Political discussions with my mates were never any cause for conflict because we all shared the same beliefs in the justification of our actions.

If any colleague had dared to give a different opinion I am sure he would have been ostracised at best and assaulted at worst.

I cannot recall any colleague thinking that we would lose the war.

We just knew we were right in what we were doing.

My optimism was fuelled to a great degree by the very open gratitude of the African people we helped after terrorist incidents, medical treatment and in some cases voluntary removal to a less terrorist infected area.

It was my policy and I believe many others to carry sweets to give out to the children on arrival at a kraal or school, or food and donated clothing for the adults, all of which seemed to be well received, in non terrorist area's.

In contrast we could tell if there was a terrorist presence by the sullen and unhelpful attitude of kraal dwellers, refusal to accept gifts etc. on some of visits.

These attitudes solidified my belief that we were right and they were wrong.

7. How much understanding did you have of the war?

I did not have a great deal of understanding about the motivations of the "enemy" just that they were wrong and cruel and supported by the Communists and the liberal left of the West.

In general I thought they were jealous of our high standard of living compared to the rest of Africa from whence they came.

What were your sources of information?

If you mean information with regard to terrorists and their activities, these came from paid informers, and from captured terrorists, some of whom agreed to work with the Security Forces, and taught us all we needed to know about their tactics and motivation.

Usually this was in the form of forced recruiting to the terrorist cause, I rarely heard of volunteers to them, and assumed that all were press ganged, just waiting to be freed by the Security Forces.

Apart from that I was ignorant of their ideological beliefs and just how determined they could be against us.

In cases where a terrorist chose to stand and fight or commit suicide rather than be captured, which happened several times when I was involved in contacts, was something I did not understand.

I usually put it down to indoctrination of what he thought we would do to him if captured rather than any ideological concept on his behalf.

Local politics was supplied by the local radio service, I never tried to get any other view from other radio stations, and felt it was slightly traitorous to listen to the BBC.

When I travelled to the UK and Europe during this period I was horrified at the bias against "us" that was prevalent in those countries, especially the churches, this only firmed up my resolve that we were right, and the churches had all been undermined by communism.

How important do you think the international environment (Cold War) was in shaping your attitudes to the war/liberation struggle?

I believed very firmly that we were fighting against Communism and as such were doing the job for spineless other Governments, I was convinced that the European and American Governments secretly

supported us, how else could we continue to exist as a country without such help.

What did you think of your commanding officers?

I would like to break this down into “very senior officers” Commissioner, Assistant /Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner etc. as on the right hand of God and not to be spoken to until first addressed by them, as such I had very little contact with them.

They at times visited forward posts on Christmas day etc to keep up morale etc.

The next lot of “senior Officers” Chief Superintendents and below were much more available to us at various meetings, and in the “sharp end” with the rest of us, although not in some of the more isolated posts.

They were respected but if their orders were considered onerous, they were at times ignored, or short cuts taken, as we went our own way, unless caught, then we would face the music, by sympathetic men who understood us.

What did you think of the ‘protected villages’ scheme?

At first I supported it whole heartedly, as a means of protecting the people and denying the terrorists food.

After a year or so I started to get reports of rapes, assaults and other crimes by the District Assistants on a confined population, this played right into the terrorists hands who exploited it very successfully against the rest of us.

I wrote several reports to this effect and received notification that the Commissioner had received my reports, but nothing appeared to change, I found this very frustrating and became unpopular for banging this particular drum too hard.

In the end I think this system accelerated the end of the war in the terrorist favour.

8. How far do you think that the war helped to create – and sustain a sense of Rhodesian identity?

I think the war solidified the belief of one nation fighting together, against the whole world.

I recall the UDI speech whilst armed with a .303 rifle and 5 rounds of ammunition, patrolling the African townships in Bulawayo and honestly believing we could rout any UN troops that crossed our border.

The Africans I spoke to did not seem to care one way or another about UDI.

It certainly caused me to work much more closely with my African colleagues, and to learn about their beliefs etc. prior to my joining the BSA Police the only relationship I had with other races was a “master and servant” one.

What other factors do you think were important?

I believe and still do that had Rhodesia been given enough time it would have evolved into a truly multi racial country, this in turn would have influenced South Africa and possibly world opinion about failed African states.

How much had you travelled outside Rhodesia?

I have travelled fairly widely in Europe, Britain and Israel whilst still a member of the BSA Police and after my service.

9. How much importance did you (and your family) attach to African nationalism?

Whilst at school and in my early years in the BSA Police non at all. My parents knew nothing about it and our friends were equally ignorant.

Once I joined Special Branch I began to see the threat posed against us by African Nationalism and the possibility that we too would become just another failed African State.

This hardened my resolve to fight as hard as I could against it.

How far did you differentiate between black Rhodesians and the ‘terrorists’?

What was your relationship/contact with Rhodesian black troops?

How far did you feel it to be a tribal war? Racial war? Civil War?

Ideological war?

The African men I worked with were colleagues and I never considered them the enemy at any time, we were in the minority when patrolling etc. and never did any of them try to turn against me, or harm me, in fact the opposite was the case, if any of them were injured I helped and protected them as they did to me.

Visits to hospitals to see them and their families were a regular occurrence and vice versa. Families were supported by individual members and the Government.

I believe spirit de corp was foremost.

I did hear of the odd deserter but in general these were very few and far between. In my opinion this occurred after capture by the enemy and then brain washing them.

At the time why did you think the 'terrorists' were fighting? How far did you differentiate between ZIPRA/ZANLA & UANC?

I in general disliked ZANLA but had a sneaking admiration for ZIPRA because they put up more of a fight and did not run away after the first few shots, which ZANLA did during contacts

UANC and their Pfumo Re Vanhu were regarded by me as petty thugs, given firearms and then turned to being bullies, raping and pillaging at will and turning the local population even more in favour of the terrorists.

They were however useful cannon fodder but nothing else.

How far do you think this affected HOW the war was fought?

UANC helped bring the war to an end through their violence against locals.

I believe Internal Affairs in the beginning were very valuable and helped the locals tremendously, when they became involved in Protected Villages they lost their creditability.

As the war intensified all sides became more brutal, with the result that the ones who would be willing to murder in cold blood gained the upper hand.

In general security forces were not in a position to or would want to murder in cold blood, exceptions there were made in the heat of the moment, but I do not believe security forces buried people alive, cut off lips, and tortured in front of whole villages with the sole purpose of intimidation.

Leaving:

10. When did you leave the BSAPolice?

In October 1980.

I thought I would try to stay on in the Police Force under the new regime, but some factors that convinced me to leave were:

Prior to the independence elections and installation of the new leadership I was in my office when about 50 men from Pfumo Re Vanhu , all armed with AK rifles and RPG 7 launchers surrounded my office in Gatooma.

The forced my secretary and all my staff out and kept me in the office as a hostage until such times as they received their pay and rations which they alleged were overdue at their Assembly Point.

I was able to contact Superintendent Whitelaw the officer Commanding Gatooma District and tell him what was happening.

He arranged that a SWAT team from Salisbury be called, but this took some hours during which these men made it very plain they did view my presence in the Police Force as acceptable to them.

Although very noisy and threatening they did very little except to over turn desks, pull out telephones, tear up papers and refuse to allow me to leave the office.

Eventually the SWAT team arrived and after some negotiating and the payment of funds due they left.

It did make me doubt as to what would happen under any new dispensation and its capabilities.

Some time after that Commissioner Allum and then Home Affairs Minister Joshua NKOMO came to address the local police force and announced the BSAP were to be re-named Zimbabwe Republic Police,

his exact words were to quote Shakespeare and say “a rose by any other name smells as sweet.”

At the time NKOMO must have been the most hated man in the country by the whites, so the atmosphere was very tense.

NKOMO then asked each Officer in Charge to stand and identify himself and to receive questions from the floor.

Chief Inspector Rusty Bye (OIC Gatooma Urban) was the first to stand and after introducing himself, Nkomo asked his (Bye's) men to discuss any issue of concern to them.

Several of his men accused him (Bye) of being a racist because he refused to salute black officers, there were several other comments along these lines, before Mr. Bye turned and walked out of the hall to jeers.

When my turn came I was asked why I did not allow Government transport to collect and return staff to their quarters before and after duty, my reply concerning rules and regulations and safety concerns, was met with jeers.

Another question about why I did not allow the use of Government transport to attend foot ball matches, my reply was also jeered.

On a daily basis I held meetings with my staff and had done so for years and not once had these issues been raised.

I was devastated by this re-action from men to whom I honestly believed I had always had an honest and open relationship with, I felt betrayed, and wondered who could be relied on in the future.

Thereafter I did not think there was any longer a working relationship between myself and my men, although my more senior men told me to ignore it, as they regarded the trouble makers as a minority.

These same senior men tried to persuade me from resigning but never made their views public it was always on a one to one basis.

With hind sight I now see that what in effect was happening was that as a new Government was in the making, they had no choice but to stick it out, whereas as I and other whites could leave the country and start again, as most did.

A few weeks later an elderly white couple were driving from Gatooma to Salisbury when they were forced off the road and into a ditch by a Land Cruiser with armed men inside, who had fired shots in the direction of this couple.

I went to investigate and found the couple shaken but not hurt, and recovered some AK cartridge cases.

A road block was set up in the Selous area and stopped a Land Cruiser.

When I attended I found five or six men armed with AK rifles and one who admitted the whole incident, saying the old couple were slowing him down too much.

He identified himself as Comrade Rex NHONGO, he allowed himself to be arrested and made a full confession in a warn and caution statement, to a charge of attempted murder.

At no time did any of his body guards stop me, although they were very threatening, they did not actually do anything.

I detained him and notified CID HQ of the arrest whilst still at the Selous Police post.

A short time later I had a phone call from Assistant Commissioner J. Denley, who after listening to me, told me to release Nhongo immediately, on the grounds that the whole country was a powder keg, it would be in all of our best interests to let him go and forward the docket to CID HQ for a decision.

I released Nhongo and heard nothing further about the incident.

My wife started to receive death threats on the phone against her and our son.

It was now obvious to me that politics was overtaking the law, I felt there was nothing more I could contribute so I decided to resign and in October 1980 left the police force.

Did you leave Rhodesia/Zimbabwe?

Yes to RSA.

Where did you go to?

We immigrated to Zululand, RSA, the only job available was that of Security Officer.

Schooling was good as were the health services.

My deciding factor to take up this employment was because that the company that employed me gave us a free house as part of the package, as we could not afford to buy or rent this was a blessing.

Was this temporary or permanent?

Permanent

When did you settle in the country you now live in?

In 1981 after leaving the police force.

I have now retired to Cape Town in 2008 having spent 25 years in Zululand.

How did you find conditions and the situation of the country you settled in? How different did you feel from the other residents? Why?

My first shock was as to how lowly my occupation was in the eyes of the community, who were mainly farmers who owned the land given to them by their Grandfathers.

We were treated as “when we`s” and people who could not defend their own country, so don’t come here and tell us how to ruin our country etc.

We were certainly not welcomed or accepted by the local community of whites who had lived in the area for generations.

Seats at school concerts were reserved for the “old real locals” and we were often moved out of our seats to the rear of the hall, with the worst views.

Sports events were likewise arranged.

Gradually over time as I progressed up the corporate ladder and was able to help some of the locals with industrial relations, crime and other problems, I was eventually accepted as a part of the community.

To obtain work and other permits were also very time consuming the overall view appeared to be that because I had stayed for a period of time under the Mugabe Government, and then I must have been be a spy for Mugabe.

I had numerous visits from the then SA Special Branch to find what I knew about Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, with warnings against helping the other side.

What did you think of the 'end of empire'?

I never considered the Empire only my small part of it, but somehow feel more English then the English.

With hindsight what is your view of the struggle in the 1970s ?

My comments are made as a much older and hopefully wiser man then I used to be, so in that context:

I would have done some things differently, I would have listened to a broader consensus of political opinion and taken the effort to listen to short wave radio for alternate views, something I now do religiously.

The loss of life and injuries on all sides seems a complete waste.

My move was justified in my mind in that both my children have attained University education, something that may not have happened had I stayed in Zimbabwe

Paradoxically I thoroughly enjoyed my Police career even the war which had aspects of sheer joy combined with sheer terror and some horror.

11. After leaving Rhodesia did you join any other Police or Military service?

I was advised, by the SA Special Branch that I could show loyalty to my new country by joining the South African Police Reserve (unpaid volunteer) this I did for ten years, carrying out ordinary policing in a rural area, this eased our settling into a new country.