

Dennis (Rusty) Theobald

Born and brought up in the UK. Joined the RAF in the UK as a regular for three years, as an alternative to National Service, in 1952. During this time, was posted to Rhodesia. Returned to the UK and then went back into the RRAF in Rhodesia in 1958. Left Zimbabwe for the UK in 1983.

This is Dr Sue Onslow interviewing Mr Dennis, also known as 'Rusty', Theobald in Aldershot on Thursday 11th December 2008. Rusty, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by telling me how did you come to be in Rhodesia in the 1960's and 1970's?

It started when I joined the RAF as a regular for a three year term. I had been called up to do my 'National Service' stint of two years but went for the three year period as a regular because it increased my pay from 28 shillings to £3 10 shillings a week .

When was that?

That was in 1952. I went on to do my mechanic's course at RAF St Athan, South Wales. After passing the mechanics course I was asked where I would like to be posted and I requested the Middle or Far East and ended up in Rhodesia, a very lucky posting. When I arrived, the first headline I read in the Bulawayo Chronicle was "RAF to leave the colony". Having just arrived I volunteered to stay for one year to help close down the three RAF stations in Rhodesia 'Heany, Thornhill and Kumalo. I came back to the UK in 1954 and increased my three year contract to five so that I could qualify for the offer of advanced training to become an Airframe Fitter. When I finished my five years I went back to Rhodesia and joined the Royal Rhodesian Air Force on a three year contract with a one year option after that. Because of the break-up of the Federation we were all invited to sign on as permanent members of the Royal Rhodesian Air Force by Sir Roy Welensky. I took up the option and signed on as a permanent member.

Where had you been born and grown up in the UK?

I was born in Fleet, Hampshire and was brought up in that area. My father died when I was one year old. He was electrocuted while working at the top of a wooden pole, much like a telegraph pole, on a high tension power cable. My mother died in 1941 with TB so my brother and I were orphans when I was only eight years old. My brother and I grew up being cared for by our Grandma. She looked after me for five years and then I was passed over to my Aunt Flo and her husband Ted who was a Captain in the RAMC (Royal Army Medical Corps). That's mainly why I chose the Air Force for my future, I had seen enough of army life and married quarters. It wasn't too bad but I had seen the Army and did not fancy it.

Yes, 'There has to be something different from this.' So how did you find Rhodesia in your first time then when you were a regular servicemen in the early fifties?

I found Rhodesia to be very good, that's the reason why I went back, I was delighted with it. It was a good life and even better now on my return because I was now part of Rhodesia and not sort of housed and confined to Heany where I hardly left the station. With the RAF I was not receiving enough pay to go anywhere, Bulawayo was eighteen miles away and we could

only get to there on what they called 'a liberty run' this was a free Air Force bus which was only put on when there was a football match to watch at the Queen's ground.

Otherwise you were confined to base

(00:03:57) Well yes and no, I wasn't confined to base but there was nowhere to go. The station had everything, such as rugby, football and a swimming pool with a small gymnasium, we had everything even a cinema which was a converted large hangar.

How many of you were there?

Oh there was over a thousand of us, that is ground crew. There were eight rows of huts and I think it was eight huts in a row, there were twenty five in each hut making over a thousand members.

You make it sound like a chicken battery farm!

Not so, we were quite comfortable and each hut could just about raise two football teams so there was always loads of sport. We finished work at 1 o'clock because it was too hot to work so we played football all afternoon instead, it was great. We would then end up in the swimming pool, it was absolutely great. We didn't lay any eggs!

This was the British Royal Air Force?

Yes, the RAF.

So was there much co-training with the Rhodesian Air Force at that point?

No, at that time Southern Rhodesia had an Air Wing of the Army and it became an Air Force in 1952 /3 when Southern Rhodesia joined Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to form the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.

So on going back to Rhodesia in the late fifties: did you find it different? After all this was the starting of the break-up of the federation?

Yes in 1958 I went back and it was completely different, now I had a room to myself. I was still single and I was now a corporal not an AC, which was a nothing. This time I've got rank and I've got money, the pay was much better than the RAF and I could go anywhere. The first thing my friend and I did was to buy a car which I couldn't have done in the RAF. I returned to Rhodesia with my friend from the RAF. I talked so much about Rhodesia, and my dream to return, that he decided to come with me.

Did you try and persuade your brother as well?

Yes I did because he was ex National Service and a tractor engineer, building new tractors. I did try to get him to come over and join the Air Force Motor Transport Section, but he didn't want to. He just gave me a straight "no", he would rather stay in England.

So your friend, was he also stationed at the same place as you? The one that you had persuaded to come out to Rhodesia with you?

(00:06:47) We were stationed at RAF North Weald in Essex near Epping Forest and we met there in 1954. As I said I spoke so much about Rhodesia that he decided he wanted to come with me as well. So we both sailed from Southampton on the Edinburgh Castle of the Union Castle Line. During the cruise we used to have a bet on the Ships Derby each day. You had to guess how many miles (how many knots) the ship would travel each day and we had a go at it every day. We had a few wins and then eventually on the last day they announced that "it's the Golden Derby today". Only certain people could take part and they were the ones who had been taking part the most during the trip". Because the people with money were mainly members of first class, there was only one name from tourist class who qualified. The name was 'Theodore'. We had entered under my name 'Theobald' because my friend said that I was always lucky. When we said 'Theobald' the person wrote it down incorrectly and put 'Theodore' instead.

And that's how you stayed?

Yes, because we won that first day we decided to stick with the lucky name and on the last day we won the Golden Derby. Instead of the normal two shillings a ticket, where we purchased five between us each day, the Golden Derby was £5 a ticket which we could ill afford.

And how much money did you win?

Well we got a fistful of travellers cheques. All the people who were on the boat had paid off their credit notes to the ship's Purser in travellers cheques and we got some of these passed onto us. We were advised that we could cash them in with the bank that would come onto the ship when it docked. When my friend and I arrived at RRAF New Sarum, Rhodesia we were able to put down a deposit on a car.

Oh I see! With your winnings

Yes, to the surprise of all the other members of the Corporals and Airmen's Mess we bought a car, between us, using the winnings as a deposit.

So what did you buy?

It was a Ford Consul Mk I and everybody told us that we should not have bought a car between us because there would be arguments. Well we didn't argue and I taught Den to drive. My friend's name was also Dennis and we got on very well together. Everybody realised that we were going well so they all started to pair off and buy cars between two. Unfortunately they didn't all get on so well as we did. Mainly they were, one who had a driving licence and a the other a learner. In one case two guys bought a king size car, a Chevy, with a V8 engine. The one who had the driving licence, considering himself to be the king pin, decided to turn it into a convertible so he cut the roof off without letting his partner know. We asked him "why do you want a convertible?" He said "well Rhodesia is so hot" We then asked him what would he do in the rainy season and he said, "Oh I hadn't thought about that". He was a member of the water polo team so I suppose he was used to getting wet. It was his disappointed partner that would suffer most. That partnership did not last very long.

So at the start of the 1960's did you pay much attention to what was going on politically in Rhodesia?

In the 1960s?

Early 1960's, were you paying attention to what was going on, on the political scene?

(00:10:08) Oh yes, but being in the forces you support the government of the day. You don't have a vocal opinion, but you have your own mind of course.

Did you vote?

Oh yes, we were permitted to vote.

What was your mind? You said you had your own mind even though you supported the government of the day.

Well I thought that eventually the British government would have accepted that the white population which was only 250,000 could guide the 6,000,000 Africans to take over responsible government in time, but it would take time. It couldn't be done straight away and I think Ian Smith got it wrong when he said "never in my lifetime". They did get independence in his life time, but look how it turned out. Looking back at what the Prime Minister, Ian Douglas Smith, had said he almost got it right but he left out the word 'responsible'.

'Never in a thousand years'

That was one that went down a bit hard but had he said "yes we can guide them, but we've got to have time to do it" and it could have worked out well. It was a super country, I played a lot of football and golf, we had to play sport to keep fit. So every Wednesday we would 'phone a golf club and say, "We've got about thirty Air Force members who would like to play golf" and they'd say, "Yes come, you are welcome". They'd put on snacks which of course we had to pay for but at special prices. Green fees were reduced for us because we were such a large group and they enjoyed our company where ever we played. We were very lucky because on Wednesdays, which were our compulsory sport days, there were no competitions. None of the clubs would let us play if there was a competition planned.

So you RAF boys got preferential treatment?

The Army had the same, so did the police, they both had terrific sports facilities. We played them often, and kept beating them of course. Never the less we found the police soccer team very hard to beat. In fact I don't recall a time when we did.

That's regimental pride coming out there! So in the run up to UDI, had you stayed in touch with your friends in the British Air Force back home? Was there any sense of what might happen? Might it come to a military clash between the two? I just wondered if those thoughts went through your head?

No I didn't keep in touch with anyone from the RAF that I can think of. My best friend came with me. I certainly stayed in contact with my family. The thought of a clash was very much in my mind and the thought of how it would work out was a problem. I would have to protect my home and family. I'm glad it never came to that.

So in the 1960's you were based in Salisbury, is that where you stayed?

Yes.

All the time? At New Sarum?

(00:13:07) When I first arrived at New Sarum which is just outside the city of Salisbury, I was posted to ASS (Aircraft Servicing Squadron). In the Rhodesian Air Force members get moved to different sections or stations every two and half to three years. Well as I said my first posting was ASS New Sarum where I stayed for eight years, my next posting was Seven Squadron (Alouette Helicopters) New Sarum where I stayed five years. This is where I first met Peter Petter Bowyer who was then Flight Lieutenant. Now as you know he's a retired Group Captain. He was without doubt, the best pilot I ever flew with.

I finally became Acting WO I in charge of the Squadron. I then held the rank of Master Technician and was getting older, so for my next move I was posted to a desk in Technical Control New Sarum. Now I held the titles of WO Tech. and Technical Adjutant, which meant that I was in charge of a team recording aircraft statistics and maintaining log cards for every component fitted to each aircraft plus all the components held in stores. I stayed there for two years and was then posted to Tech. Control Air HQ Milton Building in the City of Salisbury. I was later promoted to Warrant Officer Class I and posted back to New Sarum where I became the WO in charge of No. Five Squadron (English Electric Canberras). After just eleven months I was posted back to Air HQ because my successor, in that post, had suddenly resigned at short notice. I stayed in this position right to the end of my twenty years service when I resigned from the Air Force and took my pension. I was asked to sign on again, which I did, but I had to lose rank. I was informed that I would have to drop a rank because the position of Warrant Officer is an appointment and they wanted the younger members to come up and take over. I had to go back to the rank of Master Sergeant, a rank I had held fifteen years earlier. This was three ranks down but they were appointments and not referred to as ranks so they did not count. They softened this blow by promising me I would go back to Master Technician within a year. This promise was kept and I returned to Master Technician in six months. As a Master Sergeant I was posted back to New Sarum and on returning to the rank of Master Technician I was put in charge of SSRS (Stress Skin Repair Section) until I resigned and joined Air Rhodesia as a Technical Officer.

What were your duties then in your first posting at New Sarum?

I was an airframe fitter and my first posting was Aircraft Servicing Squadron, where the aircraft come in for the larger servicings such as Intermediate, Minor and Major inspections,. The smaller servicing, Pre Flights, Turn-rounds, After Flights and Primary Servicings were carried out by the squadrons, what we called "on the line servicing". With a Major servicing, we would take the whole aircraft to pieces, check everything, even down to the nuts, bolts, and then reassemble it. That's where I started, that's where I carried out my duties during my first eight years. In this posting I went from Corporal to Chief Technician and became second in charge of the hangar.

In your first position, these are all military aircraft. Were you servicing any civilian aircraft as well for Air Rhodesia or anything like that?

No, when I finished with the Rhodesian Air Force I applied for a position at Air Rhodesia as a civilian. I was accepted and went across the runway to become a Technical Officer for Air Rhodesia. My work there was writing documents and recording statistics on cards the same as I was doing in the Air Force, but also, responsible for the radio licences and airworthiness

certificates for all their aircraft. There were three in our office and we were responsible for weighing aircraft as well. When the layout inside of an aircraft is changed, such as the seats are moved from one position to another, it changes the balance of the aircraft so you've got to work out the 'moment' of each item which adds or removes weight in different areas. The aircraft must be held in balance otherwise it will never get airborne. If the tail is too heavy, the pilot will find it difficult to get the nose down. If the aircraft is out of balance it can be corrected by adding or removing ballast weights.

(00:17:25) You and your fellow technicians, were you all British trained? If not, where had you trained? Had some of you trained in South Africa? Were you Rhodesians who had done their technical training within the country?

There was a big drive in 1956 to 1958 to build the new Royal Rhodesian Air Force. Many Rhodesians were recruited locally from schools and from people still in Rhodesia and South Africa from the Second World War. Many more, such as myself, were recruited from the RAF, Royal Navy, Fleet Air Arm and British aircraft factories.

I did my mechanics course at RAF St Athans in South Wales. When I came back after my posting to RAF Heany, I did another course there which was advanced training to become an Airframe Fitter. On completion of my five year contract with the RAF I went back to Rhodesia and joined their Air Force. I gained my indentured apprenticeship papers from the New Sarum Technical School but also before I joined the RAF I was a Carpenter and Joiner apprentice. It was because of this that I applied to join the RAF as a Carpenter. Once I had signed the dotted line I was informed that they had enough carpenters already and I would be trained as an Airframe Mechanic (Wood) working on wooden aircraft. Types of aircraft such as the Mosquito, Vampire and Anson, which were all made of wood. When I had completed the eight weeks of square-bashing and arrived at St Athan I was informed that because wooden aircraft were being phased out I would be trained as an Airframe Mechanic (Metal). When I saw the tool box display of my new trade, I couldn't recognise any of the tools except the hammer and even that had a different shape.

How long did it take to train to be a metal fitter?,

I think we did about four or five months training on the fitter's course. It was the mechanics course which I found very difficult to get started. The first two weeks class was 'hydraulics' .I had no idea what hydraulics were. I failed and was called into the office to be told that if I didn't buck-up my ideas they would throw me off the course. The next course was pneumatics and again I had the same problem, I had never heard of newmatics never mind how to spell it. But somehow I passed and got the 60% required. From then on we had different subjects every two weeks or so, after each phase there were examinations and it seems I passed them all including the final one which gave me the title of Airframe Mechanic. I passed out from RAF St Athans with the rank of Aircraftman Class II, a no-body.

So that was all training in Rhodesia?

No, that was my initial training at St Athan, South Wales. When I return to Rhodesia I was an Airframe Fitter with the rank of Corporal. In Rhodesia when members were posted to different squadrons or sections they received 'on the job training' for that particular squadron or section. When I was working in Aircraft Servicing Squadron, all the different types of aircraft came in for large servicing so in time I got to know all the aircraft. We were trained to be able to work on any of them. Even the pilots had to be able to fly every type of aircraft we had.

What was the impact of sanctions on your job?

With our work it wasn't too bad because we had sanction busting going on. When I went to Seven Squadron in 1966 we had received twelve helicopters. The Flight Magazine reported that we only had eight left because four had crashed. What they didn't allow for was the fact that we had rebuilt the four that had crashed and they were flying again as good as new. When I left Seven Squadron in 1973, we had the use of forty-nine Alouette helicopters: The Flight Magazine still reckoned we only had about eight but the extra thirty odd were South African Police Alouettes on loan with Pilots and Technicians.

I was going to ask: Did the South African helicopters come with their own crews?

(00:21:18) That's right, each helicopter had it's own two man crew.

Oh did they?

Yes

So the technicians just worked on South African...?

Yes, they only worked on their own, and we only did our own.

What did you make of them?

Very good. We made great friends.

No, it's just interesting that the BSAP doesn't have, shall we say, the same degree of respect for the South African policemen that were sent up. I'm just wondering how the Rhodesian Air Force regarded the South African helicopter crews?

We used the same messes and had great times with them. When we went to the Forward Air Fields (which we called FAFS) which were placed at different positions around our vast border. They were there working with us and took a great load of the flying duties off our shoulders. On their first entry into Rhodesia they used to bring in 'Black Label' lager and would swap us for our 'Lion' Lager. They enjoyed the change to Lion and we enjoyed the Black Label.

There was a trade?

Yes, just a straight swap, sort of sanction busting.

I know you had sanctions busting but how much was there also a drive to making locally spare parts or the servicing equipment that you would need to maintain a modern Air Force?

We had a Section at New Sarum called AIS (Aircraft Inspection Services). These members were all very experienced Technicians from all the trades. Some were civilians. Their job was to look at all the components we couldn't get and solve the problem of repair or replacement. They would go into Salisbury, go around all the factories and the workshops and see who could make it to Air Force specification. Also our machine shop, which was equipped with all

sorts of really good lathes and milling machines, learned how to repair all sorts of component parts. When a part wore out, through continual turning or spinning such as a spindle, they would manufacture an insert or sleeve, make a new spindle to fit that sleeve and it would be back to square one. It would be a new component again and we found that they were lasting longer than the originals and now they were using a sleeve that could be replaced again and again. (00:24:04) It could keep on being replaced but then of course we had to keep an eye for fatigue of the component main body.

Mike (Faint) this morning made reference to the fact that the Rhodesian Air Force in the servicing of their machines, be they aircraft or be they helicopters, also drew on the science department of the University of Rhodesia and that the people trained up there also helped you with mechanical engineering information. In other words, there was cross fertilisation between the University and what was going on, shall we say, on the ground. Is that your recollection as well?

No. Mike was a good friend who came to Rhodesia much later when I was already a Chief Technician. He was ex RAF and became a good leader. Was he speaking about the Air Force and the University?

Yes he was

Well I didn't know that. If that was happening, I didn't know it. What I do know is that we did have some very clever members in our ERS (Engine Repair Section). Many of us joined as corporals together in 1958 and this particular member I'm thinking of was promoted through the ranks to Warrant Officer and later got commissioned. He eventually ended up in charge of ERS. Canberra aircraft Avon Mk I engines and Hunter aircraft Avon Mk 207 engines had to be returned to Rolls Royce UK for servicing, but because of sanctions this all stopped. The member I am referring to was a genius and modified the engines to overcome any faults that cropped up. When sanctions were lifted, a Rolls Royce team came over to see how we had managed to survive. Our genius had embodied modifications to the engines which were identical to ones carried out by Rolls Royce. They even offered him a job back in Rolls Royce to work with them on their engines, but he declined..

Were you also involved in maintaining the Affretair air fleet?

No, Affretair was mainly ex-Air Force members who had completed their time and had gone across to work on the civilian side of the airport but we didn't work over there at all. Affretair did rebuild the Spitfire which was ex Southern Rhodesia Air Force. Jack Malloch had the Spitfire rebuilt so that he could fly it. Well, he was the one with the money, he was the owner of Affretair.

Yes, somebody said that he ran it pretty much from his bedroom or his sitting room with all the satellite devices.

That I did not know.

What I do remember is, my son Kent was a friend of his son Ross, they started at Park Meadowlands school together in 1965.

When did you start to become aware of the war, the bush war, hotting up?

I was posted to Seven Squadron in August 1966 and that's when I realised that I was in the middle of it, just after my posting in, a hundred terrorists came over the border in one group, normally they came over in small groups of five to ten. They had never done this before but one hundred came over and we were all, the whole squadron who were not already on border duties, sent to Wankie game reserve where we were initially based at Sharpie Pan. Four Squadron (Provost aircraft) from Thornhill were based at Main Camp which is also in the Wankie Game Reserve (now called Hwange). We were right in the front line there and the terrorists were very close. I think it was the RRR (Royal Rhodesian Rifles) an African regiment who were put onto their tracks. The RRR (00:27:56) followed and killed ninety-five of the terrorists and then chased the remaining five all the way down to a place called Tjolutjo which is near Bulawayo. The RLI (Rhodesian Light Infantry) were called in and they found and eliminated the five in two days. Seven Squadron followed the RRR down to Tjolutjo giving them air cover and leap frogging them, with air transport, to new positions. The illusive five were in the jungle which we called the bush or the sticks. The RLI Commandoes found them in no time and that was the one hundred accounted for. I had just joined Seven Squadron and I realised then that the war was hotting up.

What did you think you were fighting against?

It appeared that everyone was against us and had Harold Wilson been a little bit more flexible I think Rhodesia would still be there, probably with a responsible government. It was most unfortunate the way things turned out. Every time that Ian Douglas Smith met and spoke to Harold Wilson he had moved the goal-posts and had added more conditions. Had he not done that, I think we would still be there with a thriving country run by a responsible mixed government and a splendid place to retire.

How important do you think the Cold War was? The battle against communism?

Well yes, they were trying to take over the whole of Africa and at the time we were the buffer and South Africa knew that. They knew that after us they were next. That's why they supported us. Then of course in came Kissinger to talk with Ian Douglas Smith and De Klerk. Suddenly De Klerk dropped Rhodesia like a hot brick and we were now on our own against the whole world.

I think Carrington was also behind those talks as well.

He did, at Lancaster House

Yes but South Africa had the backing of Carrington and Margaret Thatcher. In South Africa, De Klerk let Ian down and said, "We can't support you any more". At Lancaster house it was Carrington and Thatcher who put the final nail in the coffin.

Yes Kissinger was in September '76

And that was it, that was the end of it. Yes they were helping the communists to flood down to South Africa.

What made you think it was communists rather than African Nationalists?

Well, when we were fighting the terrorists in the bush, quite often there was reference to Russians and Chinese who were backing them. We found parts of uniforms and documents

that referred to them being there and leaving in a hurry. This happened when they were taken by surprise and they had to run for it, leaving clues behind. So they were the communist countries. Also places like Sweden and the World Council of Churches, they were all backing the terrorists, in other words helping the downfall.

But the World Council of Churches weren't communist?

(00:31:07) No, but they were backing the terrorists who had been trained by communists

So you didn't see them as radical nationalist guerrilla fighters backed by communists? You felt that they were communists?

No, they were terrorists trained and brain-washed by the communists with an ultimate target of the big one, South Africa. We heard stories that Africans were offered places in universities and when they arrived in a foreign country they were brain-washed and trained as terrorists. These were just hear/say stories and could have been propaganda.

On the other side of the coin then, what were you fighting for?

Probably our own freedom, to keep it as it as we knew it, we were living in paradise and we just wanted to keep it that way. We as a family had planned to stay and retire in Rhodesia.

Were you married by this time? By the Seventies?

Yes, I was married in 1960 so we were well and truly settled.

What particularly did you feel you were fighting to defend?

The country, we were always loyal to the Queen. At all of our Air Force dining-in nights, we always toasted the Queen, right to the end. We were fighting for the country, we were fighting for our families. My family was there, my children were at good schools, they were being brought up as we wanted them to be brought up. Much better than they would have been brought up in England I'm sure. Rhodesian schools had very high standards.

Rusty, I'm curious to know how much did you think that in Rhodesia, the best of British was being used in terms of British imperial values? British social values? Manners, hard work, and other social values which were also prevalent? Or did you feel that Rhodesia was something different and something apart?

No, Rhodesia was very British, everything we did was very British indeed.

Did you go back to Britain at all in the 1960's?

No, but I did go back to Britain in 1959. As I said before, I lived with my uncle TED and aunty Flo, he was in the RAMC and in 1959 he died in Millbank Military Hospital in London. I received a telegram to tell me that he was on the dangerously ill list. So I flew back straight away, he had been like a father to me. I had only been in Rhodesia for six months when I flew back. It took me ages to pay the money back which I had to borrow from a local finance company. The Air Force Benevolent Fund would not allow me a loan. Just before retiring from the Air Force, in December 1977, our family of four came over to England for a one month

holiday. We picked December when it was bitterly cold just to see if we could return to, and enjoy, England despite the cold. We found it to be grand and were amazed at the range of goods which were available in the shops. In Rhodesia we had one type of cheese, cheddar. It was a case of take it or leave it. That is if you can find it. In England we counted twenty-seven different choices of cheese in one super market.

Oh really?

That was the idea in 1977, we liked what we saw and knew that we would return. We realised at that time the way things were going in Rhodesia and we needed to plan for our future.

Why '77? Did you feel the writing was on the wall then?

(00:34:27) Well yes, I was coming up for my twentieth year so I was now due retirement and a pension. I thought, I can leave the Air Force and return to England, but the Air Force talked me out of that and said "we need members with your experience to stay here", so we talked about it. I needed time any-way to sell our two houses, they both had a swimming pool. I retired, took my pension and signed on again. I also needed time to see our daughter Sarah finish her 'O' levels at Queen Elizabeth Girls School in Salisbury.

Were both houses in Salisbury?

Our first house, we built in Hatfield which is midway between New Sarum and Salisbury and the other one was right in the City of Salisbury. Our second house was a big old colonial building, absolutely super, and it was our plan to retire in this one. But by the time 1980 came, we could see the writing on the wall. We gave Robert Mugabe and his government ten years, but found it was running down much faster than we had anticipated. We had to move out as quickly as we could.

But in 1977 you said you came back?

Yes

How long for?

It was one month

How did you find it, besides bitterly cold?

We couldn't believe it. When we walked into the shops and saw all the electrical goods which we had been starved from and also in the supermarkets we saw many different types of the same product to chose from. We just couldn't believe our eyes, we had gotten use to seeing empty shelves.

It's overwhelming

Referring back to the cheese we only had one choice 'Cheddar', which was made locally and it never got onto the shelves in the supermarket because as they came out with the cheese trolley, everybody rushed to get their allowance of one small piece each. However by the time the trolley got to the shelf all the cheese was gone. You had to be there when it came out. The

shelves were now emptying out, there was less and less on them on each visit. I'm now talking about 1980 and onwards.

So you're implying suggestions of food shortages? Or limited food in Rhodesia at the time? Well ok, not a range of choice, the basics were there definitely.

Yes there was limited choice of everything. When we came back in '77, we noticed the difference. Items like cheese, sugar, cooking oil and mealie-meal were all produced in Rhodesia yet they were very scarce. Later of course after 1980 these things were not available at all. (00:37:08) Now, with their independence they just import many items from other countries and it goes straight to the black market, which is most unfortunate for the indigenous because they cannot afford the black-market prices..

So you came back for a very short time?

Yes, we really enjoyed our visit to the UK. We went round all our friends and our relatives. Everywhere we went there was a banquet waiting, we could hardly move at the end of each day because we felt bloated, We tried to eat with everyone, they'd put on such a show and it would have been unkind to say, "No thank you".

How did you find British society? British culture, coming back?

We were amazed at the colour television in Rhodesia we had only had black and white sceens. We were a bit disappointed with films, television and their use of foul language. We were not used to this in Rhodesia. I suppose we were very Victorian, we liked it that way. Being in military service for 27 years one hears quite a lot of swearing but it still shocks me. In our house we did not even use the words 'bloody' or 'dam'.

That's between men

Yes, it still shocked me, even now I can switch off a film because of the swearing in it. It just sort of upsets one to hear it and there's no need for it.

No, it is gratuitous. So any other aspects of British life that really struck you, coming back then?

No, I don't think so. What we do enjoy is all the holidays that we can go on now, coach rides and cruises and trips to anywhere that are available from England. When we were in Rhodesia we could only really go on holiday to South Africa, which was a long way away or to Mozambique a 400 mile drive each way. We went to Beira, Mozambique nine consecutive years. They were cheap relaxing holidays just sitting on the sandy beach of the warm Indian Ocean and then going out to dinner in the evenings with Portuguese food and wine which were delicious. They were very enjoyable holidays.

So you came back to this country for a month in 1977 and then you went back?

Yes, while I still had time, I didn't retire until 1978 so we had time to plan what we were going to do and eventually we decided 'yes it's great we will come back to England'. Also the senior members of our families were getting much older and they were beginning to die off and we needed to be here and spent time with them.

Rusty, how old were your children then? In the late '70's?

When we came back in 1977 our son Kent was sixteen and Sarah was twelve years old. We offered Kent the chance to stay in England and miss the national call-up period when he reached 18. But he declined and said that all his friends would do their bit and he would do his.

So he'd already done National Service?

(00:40:26) No, he completed his 'O' Levels at eighteen in 1979 and was called-up straight away to do his TF (Territorial Force) for the Air Force. He was trained to be a Teleprinter Operator, what they called a PRONTO. One pronto is required at each of the FAFS where the squadrons were based. Their duty was to report back to headquarters by signals all the flying statistics and incidents of the day. When Kent suddenly appeared at the different FAFS, the helicopter pilots asked him, "As your name is Theobald do you know Rusty? When he told them that I was his dad he enjoyed free beer where ever he went and they even took him out to dinner at local inns.

That was a compliment to you, yes. Did you talk to him much about the war?

I don't think so, no. He knew what was going on, even while he was at school he was aware of what was going on. When he had completed his call-up period he planned to go to South Africa but when he tried to get immigration papers they messed him about so much. He actually wrote them a letter and told them they could keep their papers and decided to come back England as well. He actually came back to England one year after me, when he became disappointed with the South African red tape.

Were your friends critical of you leaving Rhodesia at the end of the seventies?

No, I think everybody was talking about leaving but it surprises me how many people are still there, I just can't believe it, friends I worked and I played sport with, I would have thought they would have come out. Either they're financial or political prisoners, in that they don't have the cash or a passport where they can go anywhere permanent. They have no choice but to stay there.

But you'd kept your British passport all the time had you?

Yes

Had you taken out Rhodesian citizenship?

Yes, I had a Rhodesian passport and then we had to change it for a Zimbabwe one but fortunately we didn't have to hand in our British ones. That came later when Robert's regime said "you can't have two, you've got to get rid of one". Some people handed in their passports to the Zimbabwe government who passed them on to the British Passport Office, they immediately sent them back to the people. So they had complied with what they were told to do and they'd got away with it. But no, we had two passports each. My wife Shirley and I still have both. Some have the corners cut off of course, as they expired, but we still have them as souvenirs.

Rusty, how much do you think the war helped make a sense of Rhodesian identity? Rhodesian patriotism was because of the bush war?

Oh yes, I think having that war just bound the forces together. The Police, the Army and the Air Force were always in opposition, particularly on the sports field but when you go to war and you're in the front line, you meet all members of the different forces and when you walk through the bush you (00:43:48) meet old friends on different patrols and they shout out, "Hi Rusty, how are you going?" I knew quite a few different Army and Police guys like that. I ran our Sunday morning boozers football team so quite a few people knew me because of my position but it was difficult for me to remember them all, I just responded to them as though I could never forget them.

So that's quite a small community then? In relative terms?

Well yes it would have been. I knew Wrex Tarr (television star and a member of the BSAP (British South African Police) TF (Territorial Force) like National Service. When I was the CMC (Chairman of the Messing Committee), I had invited him to our mess and he danced with my wife. Shirley was the envy of every wife in the mess. He was such a good looking chap. When meeting at the FAFs, Wrex would always call out, "Hi Rusty, how are you going?" and it was the same with the Army chaps. I knew the Rhodesian Heavyweight Champion Wrestler and the Rhodesian Light-Heavyweight Champion Wrestler, both of them were in the Army as regulars. Quite often we would have snooker nights, darts nights when we would visit each-other's messes. So it was a good friendly atmosphere all round.

So on the sports field you were bitter rivals then? And in the battlefields you were pretty much united? How about in social terms? I mean were you the Brylcreem boys in the RAF?

I wasn't a Brylcreem boy, I didn't have enough hair!

That'll be why!

But I can tell you, I still use Brylcreem on the little bit I do have, even now. I was told by my New Sarum cricket captain that when I put Brylcreem on my hair to wipe the residual on my hands over my face and ears as a sun block while fielding. I still do that every day and that's why I have such soft skin and look so young.

One of my previous interviewees described the Rhodesian Air Force as 'the glamour boys'. They were the ones who...

They've always said that and we knew it, particularly with the Army although I'm not so sure about the BSAP. In the case of the Army, when they went to the front line they went with their sleeping bags and they slept in the bush. When we went to a FAF we had Air Force built barracks where-ever we went. They were concrete bases on which our carpenters built wooden portable sheds which were our billets. Mainly there were two members to each room and we had sheets and pillows and everything to make us comfortable. Quite often when we went to a new FAF, we would have to have meals with the BSAP or with the Army until we were able to get our own cookhouses and dining rooms established..

I can see why they might be jealous

No, they were trained to be much harder than we were, they accepted their plight. The Army guys told us that the best sound in the world is a helicopter coming to take them back to the FAF to a hot meal and a dry bed or even better, home.

In percentage terms, how high was the casualty rate in the Rhodesian Air Force during the war?

Nowhere near the casualty rate of the Army, I don't think the police were either. Of course any incursion was a police problem because terrorists were not soldiers invading us, they were illegal immigrants with no papers carrying illegal weapons. So it was really a police problem and we just backed them up and so did the Army.

(00:47:06) **So the police were the front line?**

Yes they should have been right at the front, but with the Air Force helicopters and the Army Fire Force on instant standby, the Army with Air Force over-head cover were always first to a contact.

End of Tape

Part two, talking to Rusty Theobald

Rusty, obviously working on an air base, you had a very close understanding of the day to day running of the war. But did you also have a wider view of what was going on?

When I was posted to Milton building, I was then Warrant Officer in charge of Technical Statistics. Every Friday we had an intelligence meeting where all the Air Force HQ staff went to an intelligence briefing. They told us all about how the war was going, what was happening, where the problems were and which were the hot areas and everything else around the country.

I read recently that in 1977 that the security chiefs told Ian Smith that he couldn't hope to win the war, militarily. That he would have to come to a degree of a political settlement. Would you say that chimes in with your recollection?

Yes, I remember some of those statements coming over but I don't think they broadcast it on the radio or television, there was always that sort of feeling in peoples minds, that it couldn't be a military win because there were so many against us and we were so few.

So you'd say, for you, that realisation started to kick in before the broader population?

I think that right up to 1979, when the Kissinger talks were going on in South Africa, we felt that we were going to eventually make it, we still hoped things would settle and we would have a good life to look forward to, even right up to almost the end. Life was so good that we did not want to let it go.

That was '76 though, that was the Kissinger...

1976, OK, yes but right up to the end it was when that turning point came, on that last year

when everything started to turn and the South African government dropped out of the boat and left Ian paddling on his own.

And the war intensified too in the country?

Yes, it really got going in 1972, that was a big year for intense incursions. Fortunately I was finishing my time with Seven Squadron and I was now posted to Technical Control flying a very comfortable desk. I still had to do my periodic stint at one of the FAFs as Technical Officer.

But even under the internal settlement with Bishop Abel Muzorewa?

(00:02:45) Well we thought that when they said they would share partnership, Ian Douglas Smith and Abel Muzorewa, we thought that was going to work, but unfortunately it did not. Ndabaningi Sithole also started to become moderate in his way of thinking but as soon as he let it be known, he disappeared. Nobody knew where he went and I think somebody got hold of him, that is how things have always been done in Africa as far back as the Zulu chief Charka and beyond.

Well no, he faded as a political force. He really did

But he disappeared from the scene and nobody knew where he went, he just disappeared, we never saw or heard of him again.

Right, ok, well he certainly participated in the February '80 elections.

Yes that's true, it was after that when he became surplus to requirement.

What was your sense then when Zimbabwe did become independent in 1980? Did you feel the struggle had been worthwhile? The war of the '70's, had it been worthwhile or not?

Yes I think it was worthwhile in that we thought we were going to eventually get the country and keep it because it was our home at that time. I felt that it was going to be our retirement home and that's why we'd bought houses and we were ready to retire in what was a pure paradise. We'd bought one house right in Salisbury that was in easy walking distance for the shops for when we retired and yes, everything looked rosey to us.

But how much were the population in the urban areas, right in Salisbury, aware of how bad the war had got for the rural areas?

Well they would only listen to the news casts and I think they gave pretty good cover of what was going on because when I was working in Milton building I would have to take over as ops room duty officer, which was an all night duty looking after about six or seven telephones, radios, secret telephones, and teleprinters; and all the signals that came in from all the Forward Air Fields. These signals had to be read and plotted on a large map using chinagraph pencils. All incidences such as the killings of the day, whether they were security forces, civilian or terrorists. We had to number these incidences on the signals and mark them on the map with the same number for commander to come in, first thing the next morning, to read the signals and cross refer them to the map. So he and his staff officers knew exactly what was

going on. This sort of information never reached the radios; they would just give out numbers, two killed here or three killed there, a lorry blown up by a land mine or an aircraft crashed or whatever it was. But the person on the lonely duty would work, sometimes, up to one o'clock in the morning plotting this map. We were in that ops room all night, on our own, with one small window and a door that had to be locked at all times. There was a bed in a side room where we could sleep but it was heavy going. Particularly for somebody who wasn't used to that sort of work, like me I was initially just a spanner boy.

So you came back to this country with your family, with your kids and then what did you do? After all you arrived with no job, having only retired...?

(00:06:31) That's right, I went all around the different airfields looking for a job, Blackbushe, Heathrow, Gatwick, even Biggin Hill. I tried all of those and none were interested. I tried different factories and had long interviews mainly because they wanted know everything about Rhodesia. I think, reading between the lines, they considered I was too old. They didn't actually say that, but I was fifty at the time. I tried hard to get a job for about nine months. Eventually we realised that the only thing to do was to leave Aldershot and go where the jobs were and that happened to be London. We went to London, where Shirley and I got jobs straight away, and Sarah we managed to enrol with Lucie Clayton Secretarial College in Knightsbridge, a young ladies finishing school.

And some pretty nice accommodation you've just told me, with the job

My wife got a job in Burlington House in the Linnean Society which is next to the Royal Academy, she became the housekeeper. The job came with a flat on the top floor. It was fantastic, a two bed roomed flat with dining room, kitchen and bath room, right in the middle of London's West End. I went to the Corps of Commissionaires in Fleet Street, an ex-military unemployment agency. They found me a job as a uniformed security member in Wood Lane, White City. I had to look after six floors of offices and thirty-six ware-houses, just built and most were still empty.

How did your kids feel about leaving Rhodesia?

My son didn't want to leave Rhodesia at first. I had stayed an extra year after my wife Shirley came back in 1982 to look after her mother who had had a stroke. I followed in 1983 because my daughter Sarah was still doing 'O' levels at school so when she finished her 'O' levels, we both came back. Sarah came back first in February and I followed in May. Because I was working for Air Rhodesia, I could get 10% tickets so, Sarah came back cheaply. I tried to work it for myself, but Air Rhodesia wouldn't have it.

But your son, you said, didn't want to leave?

He didn't, he wanted to stay in Zimbabwe, he was having a good time with his friends. Never the less he did come over in 1984 and he stayed with us for about a month. He said that it was far too cold for him and he returned to Zimbabwe. When he got back to Salisbury he found that most of his friends had gone and the good life had disappeared. So to cut a long story short, he came back to England. After leaving the Air Force he became a draughtsman and in England he switched to Graphic Computer Operator. He is now a computer boffin although he had very little training in Rhodesia on computers. He's working now as a draughtsman on computer graphics and he is head of section, he's doing really well. He

wouldn't have got that chance in Rhodesia or Zimbabwe.

As you say, the level of education that was available for whites and some blacks in Rhodesia, it was very impressive.

Particularly for the blacks because all the farmers had schools on their farms. They built churches on their farms, they opened schools on their farms, they even had, shops on their farms where their people could buy anything they wanted and all this just disappeared, burned down. The Farms have been destroyed, therefore they don't have the schools, churches or shops anymore. The African workers are still in these areas but they have lost their way of life to some greedy, so called, war veterans and some ministers of the Zimbabwe Government who have taken over the farms and have failed to produce anything.

(00:10:29) How much, in the 1970's, how much were you able to get out and about around Rhodesia? Or were you pretty much confined to Salisbury by your job, but also by the increasing war?

As I say, we went to Beira for our holidays every year. We did this trip nine times. It was a four hundred miles drive each way.

In convoy?

No, when we went to Beira there was no risk.

So you went to Beira nine times?

Yes, we went to Beira nine times then it got too risky.

But otherwise did you get out and about around Rhodesia, the country itself?

When we realised that there were problems, terrorists were blowing up the oil pipeline between Umtali and Beira docks. There was only the one road that went from Umtali to Beira with a fork going off to Maputo the capital. There was eventually trouble on the road as well, so we decided it was too dangerous to go there anymore. We then did a holiday right around the inside of Rhodesia. For this trip we obtained a tent and camping equipment, we packed the car and away we went.

How long did that great trek take?

About three weeks. We went to Zimbabwe Ruins near Fort Victoria, then Bulawayo, on to Wankie game reserve. We drove right through Wankie game reserve, which took a whole day, and saw many different animals. Drove right through and out the other side to Sinamatella where we stayed the night in a chalet, then on to Victoria Falls. We had planned to go by ferry from Victoria Falls all the way to Kariba Dam but it was too expensive. So we drove back to Salisbury which was eight to nine hundred kilometres. It turned out well because we were able to do our washing and ironing at home before taking off for Kariba the next day. This whole trip took about three weeks altogether and it was a great experience.

But that was unusual, for you to be getting out of Salisbury and touring around?

Yes., we did manage one trip to Durban where Shirley's sister lived.

Most of your life was in Salisbury?

Yes. For our trip around Rhodesia I was advised by the Air Force to take a gun with me so I drew a 9 mm Star pistol and put it in the glove compartment. My son, Kent, was only sixteen but I taught him to take the gun to pieces and reassemble it. If we were in the car and attacked, he needed to know how to handle the weapon. He was in Cranborne Boys School Shooting Team, had his own air rifle and was a better shot than I, even though I was a marksman with the FN rifle. With me being the driver I would probably be the first one to get taken out, so I showed him how to use the 9 mm if he needed to, or had to. When we went to places like (00:14:34) Fort Victoria, the people there were actually carrying automatic rifles slung over their shoulders on slings and even had holsters like cowboys with small guns on their hips. That was the first time I'd seen that, it showed the different security situation between the rural towns and the capital Salisbury.

Did that shock you?

Yes, it brought it home to us just how vulnerable they felt. They were mainly farmers that had come in from the bush to carry out their business and to shop. They were also fitting shotguns on top of their cars pointing in different directions so that from inside the car they could operate the guns either side, front or back as they wished. I also remember seeing an advert where flames came from under the car so that if the terrorists came up to the car and pointed a gun through the window, you could just press a button and a large flame, like a blowlamp, would come out and give the driver time to make a quick exit.

Just to give you enough time to get away?

That's right, you could get away from the scene, I never heard of it being used, I remember seeing somebody demonstrating it on television. Quite a lot of the cars had shotguns fitted on the top which they could fire in any direction.

But in your experience in Salisbury, did it ever come to the point that you were armed on a day to day basis?

No, I did not see anyone carrying a weapon in Salisbury. The terrorists certainly had bombers coming into Salisbury. In one case, two African girls went to a hotel, sat at a table on the lawn area to have a cool drink. They realised that there was a radio left on the table where they were sitting so when they got up and walked away they just took the radio with them. When they were clear of the hotel about a hundred or so yards away, they switched the radio on and of course it was a bomb, it blew them to pieces. The hotel was one that was frequented mostly by Africans and that was right in the City of Salisbury. The terrorists did not seem to care who they killed. They loved to pick on soft targets.

And you also mentioned an attack on a Woolworths when you were in town.

Yes, that was in the lower part of Salisbury which was called the Cows Guts. When the pioneers first settled at Fort Salisbury there were two sides of Salisbury, one settlement each side of a small river. The river is still there but a road called the Kingsway was built over it. The upper part of the settlement was on the hill where the union flag was raised in Cecil

Square. The lower side, as I said, was known as the Cows Guts. There were two Woolworths in Salisbury, one each side of the Kingsway. The Bombers picked the one that the Africans used. The blast killed 11 including 3 white people and injured 76 others.

Why did you call it ‘the cow’s guts’? I’m just curious.

I’m not too sure how it got its name, but it was the original settlement area. Then the more elite decided to cross the river and lay out a grid of roads at ninety degrees to each other. Roads with names went one way and were crossed by streets with numbers. The lower end was probably called the Cows Guts because it was down below the main part of the city. Most of the shops in that lower area were owned by Indians so things at that end of the city were cheaper. Africans were drawn towards them because they prefer these cheaper shops. Right in the middle of these shops was the large bus station which only the Africans used. Up the other end of the city there were the big stores like Meikles, Barbers, and Store bros. which were the cream of Rhodesia, posh hotels and many other big department stores. (00:18:06) All the expensive stores were in the upper end, on the higher ground, near Cecil Square.

So by the end of the seventies, how much did you think the war had come to fill the whole country? Was it total war? Even in Salisbury did you have a day to day sense of threat?

No, we didn’t have any threat. We just carried on as we always did. There was no threat really in Salisbury. I think Bulawayo, Gwelo and Umtali were pretty free too. It was only near the end when they started firing mortars at Umtali from over the Mozambique border because they had Frelimo terrorists backing them from that side .

How much professional contact did you have with Africans in your job?

Well, we had what we called a General Service Unit which was all Africans in Air Force uniform the same as ours. They and the civilian Africans had a football team and I was asked by them to referee some of their games. The Air Force and the civilian Africans used to call me Madala Ymansa, in Shona it translates to ‘Old man with a meat head’ meaning ‘Old man with no hair’. They do not have a word for hair, the nearest they have is ndavu which means beard.

Well, the ‘no hair’ bit was accurate!

Yes, they would ask me to referee their football matches and then I would go back to their mess with them and have a drink. They would ask me which I would like a ‘Castle’ or a ‘Lion’ lager? My answer was that I would like a Chibuku” which is the beer they drink. It’s a thick white beer like thin porridge. In the glass it looks like Horlicks, it’s off-white and it’s quite thick. When you drink a pint of that in one go and then put the glass upside down on your head to show you’ve cleared the glass, as was the custom, you get the drips running down and you get a big cheer and applause. I hated it but they loved it. I mean the soggy drip, not the beer.

Did you ever learn to speak any Shona or Sindebele?

Not really but I did learn quite a lot of words. When I was in Aircraft Servicing Squadron we had a African who cleaned the offices and made the tea, his name was Mackenzie. In Rhodesia we had a stoep polish called “Cobra” which was advertised on television with a

jingle. He used to creep up behind me singing the jingle “Cobra shine, Cobra shine, must be a Cobra shine”. I would chase him in and out of the offices and when I caught him he would squeal like a pig and as soon as I walked away he would be behind me again laughing like a hyena “Cobra shine, Cobra shine“. I did attend Shona classes during our lunch breaks, but as I said I didn’t speak it very well. All the Africans spoke good English and that made us lazy.

So contact with the football team and a general technician person otherwise the Rhodesian Air Force was principally white, technicians and pilots?

Yes, the civilians workers were mainly messengers and cleaners, we had six cleaners on Aircraft Services Squadron. Over on seven which occupied a smaller hangar space, we had one tea-boy whom we called, ‘The hot beverage (00:22:04) Technician’ and three aircraft cleaners. We didn’t mix with them a lot, but we were always friendly.

Was there any drive to encourage Africans to become technicians?

No, they had drivers in the Motor Transport Section who were from the GSU (General Service Unit), they could carry out small tasks, but they were not trained as technicians.

Was there anybody saying “we need to train African technicians so that they can do our jobs”?

No, when I left the Air Force, before I joined Air Rhodesia there was one African who joined the Air Force as a Technician. He worked in the Photographic Section and they reckon he knew his job well. He was good at photography and developing and other photographic tasks. He was rated quite high and came straight in as a sergeant. I was surprised to see an African in the mess, we had not seen that before because up to I then Africans had their own mess in the GSU.

And it was very divided, was there one mess for the officers who happened to be white and one mess for ? Or how did it...?

No, there were no Africans in our messes at all, that is except for cooks, cleaners and bottle-washers. In the GSU (General Service Unit) they were all policemen or drivers, the cleaners were all civilians so the uniformed Africans had their own mess but initially there were no officers. They did have warrant officers and when I left there were just two newly commissioned Africans.

How quickly did Air Rhodesia acquire black pilots?

Not while I was there. I left in 1983 and they didn’t have any African pilots. They had taken on one woman pilot but she was white and that was a big enough surprise at the time. Now of course it’s normal

Deeply shocking!

Yes, that was a surprise but she proved to be very good.

Well yes, I’m sure she was very good. Careful how you say that!

I did not meet or even see her, I just heard it through the grapevine that they had taken on a white female pilot.

So there was no idea of women serving in the Rhodesian Air Force?

Oh yes, they did, they brought in women whom we called “Blue Girls”. We had one in our office in Milton building in the Technical Control Office. She was quite good.

Quite good?

Yes, she carried out her work very well but, she would keep on saying that she was bored. There is nothing more boring than a person who keeps on telling you that they are bored. Particularly when there is plenty to do. I taught her to write some of our technical directives and many of the other recording tasks we had to do. I only gave her easy routine stuff, not the actual aircraft technical documents. For those one needs the background of many years technical experience and it would have been unfair to her.

(00:25:18) Was that a question that you only gave her ‘the easy stuff’?

I don’t think she would have coped with it, with aircraft no mistakes are allowed. In the office we had lots of cards, one for every aircraft component. On each card the complete history of that component was recorded, how many times it had been overhauled, how many hours it had completed, everything including which modifications had been embodied. We had most of these cards filed in Cardex systems, but there were so many that some were stored in a separate drawer in alphabetical or numerical order. Our Blue Girl was recording information on this particular batch in the drawer when she pulled it out too far. Down it went onto the floor, there were cards everywhere. She just turned round and looked at me because I was the Warrant Officer in charge. The other two members switched their eyes to me with their mouths open looking at me and thinking “Now what’s he going to say?” I just said “Angela, that’s the last time you drop your drawers in this office” and she burst out laughing and was pleased to pick them all up and put them back where they belonged in perfect order.

But you’re only describing one so that was...

That was the one I worked with, yes. There was another one that took over from Angela, but I didn’t know her very long, she came in just before I left that position. There were lots of Blue Girls and they came in with quite good ranks because a lot of them were qualified secretaries and that was the type the Air Force were looking for. The ones I’m talking about that came to Milton building, mainly became secretaries or assistants to the staff officers.

But this is clerical, admin staff?

Yes

This is not technical?

Oh not technical.

This is not – ‘Women can be pilots’?

Many pilots are women, but flying a Hunter and firing four twenty millimeter cannons at the same time is another story. There were many Blue Girl parachute packers in the Safety Equipment Section. Because the Air Force trained the Army in parachute jumping at the New Sarum School, these Blue Girls were packing parachutes all day every day.

And they would be volunteers? They wouldn't be doing National Service?

No, they were not called up as National Service.

These women were not conscripted?

No, they volunteered. We even had an Indian girl volunteer who worked in our ComCen Section. When they gave her a uniform it consisted of a skirt to the knee, showing her stockinged legs which was not acceptable by her religion. She was given special permission to wear her issued slacks under her skirt, which looked silly at first but we soon got used to it.

(00:27:58) **I was going to say, a 'salwar kameez'**

That's right. Another guy who joined was also Indian and he couldn't wear a normal issue hat, so he was allowed to wear an Air Force blue turban with the badge on the front. It looked very smart.

How big was the Sikh community in Rhodesia? It must have been very small?

Which one?

The Sikh community

Oh yes, there was a lot of Indians in Salisbury and Rhodesia, quite a few wore turbans. Nearly all the shops down the bottom end of Salisbury were owned by Indians of the different religions and that was the best place to buy anything cheaply.

Did they join in the war effort?

Oh yes, they were called up, although they were Indians, like us they considered themselves to be Rhodesians as well. The coloureds (people of mixed race) were also called up to do their part. They preferred not mix with the white or the black people. They had a regiment of their own and were mainly transport drivers ferrying equipment to the security forces at the front. So they had quite a task of running the roads that might be, land-mined or ambushed.

So that was entirely a coloured regiment?

Yes

They wouldn't recruit from outside that community?

No

But the Indian community was...?

I can only recall one Indian member joining the Air Force and he was the one I mentioned earlier who was permitted to wear a blue turban. I have no idea where he came from. By that time I had retired and was on my way to Air Rhodesia.

One question I do have, from what I've read it seems that Rhodesian white society was very egalitarian. It was classless; there weren't divisions in the way that, say Britain in the 1950's or the 1960's had class divisions. How does that square with your memory?

That's right

(00:29:59) (Mrs Theobald) Yes the whites treated each other as being of the same class. We had an African gardener who didn't come into the house, we didn't invite him in and I'm sure he did not want to come in. He had his own house (called a kia) on our plot. We always spoke to him as a human being and even when we went to town we treated Africans we met in the streets and shops with respect, as most people did.

I was just thinking in the way that, say in British society there would be the upper classes, landed gentry, middle classes...

(Mrs Theobald) Well we didn't have that class segregation. Of course people like Ian Smith, his members of parliament, the Governor General Sir Humphrey Gibbs and people with money living in large houses were respected and looked on as the upper echelon but within the Air Force when we had weekend parties, the whole squadron would come to our house, irrespective of rank.

So you'd invite people like Peter Petter Bowyer to your house?

Yes, all the Seven Squadron techs and pilots, who were not on duty at to front end, came to our house when we had a party. Our attraction was our swimming pool and also I was in charge of the squadron fund.

(Mrs Theobald) And the married members took turns inviting everyone to their houses in rotation.

Even when Shirley and I got married we invited the Air Force stationed at New Sarum to attend. It was mainly ground staff who came. I had only been in the Air Force eighteen months but because I was in the station football team, many people knew me. Shirley, who had just arrived from England, didn't know any of the one hundred and ten guests plus all their children who did attend.

Were you aware of an African middle class by the end of the '70's in Salisbury?

Yes, our second house was in the city of Salisbury, the capital of Rhodesia. On the outskirts of Salisbury was the African township of Harare. There was another African township nearby called Highfields. We were not permitted to buy a house in these areas. Highfields had very nice big houses way beyond what we could afford and they were owned by millionaires, African millionaires. These well to do Africans made their money by having their own businesses, some ran the big motor transport lorries to and from South Africa. They went to other countries until sanctions stopped them. Some owned bus companies and they were very wealthy. Shirley and I used to enjoy the odd day visit to Borrowdale Race Course, about once every other month. It would be full of Africans and whites all milling together in the Silver, Gold

and even the elite Members enclosure. There was no class there either. The Africans loved to have a bet on the horses just like we did.

Did you have friends who were Africans in Salisbury?

(Mrs Theobald) I had one whom I met where it I worked?

Shirley worked in an insurance company in the Conservation section and she phoned one African, who had not paid his pension up to date. Shirley asked him to come in and talk. She advised him that if he did not pay his annual premium, the policy would be closed and he could lose all he had paid so far. On his arrival at the office Shirley saw he was rather a large African and later found out that he was in fact the Heavyweight Champion Wrestler of Rhodesia, called the 'Black Panther'(00:33:22) He was so pleased with Shirley's concern for him that from then on he called her "my sister". Also, whenever he phoned in, he said that he wanted Mrs Theobald to handle his query for him.

(Mrs Theobald) And also on the street, if he was in his car he would wind down the window and shout across the street "Hello, my sister". It was really funny and very nice of him.

But otherwise, even though Rhodesia had very little racial tension, it seems to me, there were still divisions?

Yes the thing that I noticed was that on the airfield base there were toilets between all of the hangars. They were double ended, one end was for "us" and the other end was for the 'Africans'. Although all toilets were cleaned by the same African cleaners, our side had a pleasant smell, but if you went anywhere near the other end (the Africans side) there was terrible smell. Also when we worked with these civilian cleaners in the hangars and you got too close, they had an obnoxious smell coming from them. But it was due to their way of life that caused it, Their main diet is (sudsas) which is made from ground mealies and they liked to sit around open fires so you get all that smell of smoke coming back off them even when you were just talking to them. They told us that their smell was natural because they smell and look like healthy humans, whereas we have the look of the living dead (being white and pale) and we also smell unpleasant to them. This took me by surprise because I thought we were always the clean ones and yet I did understand their point of view. They had the same feeling and thoughts about us as we did about them, touche`

Coming back here, how easy did you find it to adapt to Britain in the '80's?

(Mrs Theobald) It was lovely because when we returned, there was butter and cheese and all sorts of goodies in the shops. Yes, it was great

What did you miss though about Rhodesia?

All the sport, particularly golf, near the end when I had slowed down and stopped playing the galloping games. Also I missed the sun, which meant that we didn't require much heating over there. You didn't have to buy lots of big jerseys or anything warm and you more or less operated in a pair of shorts, a tee-shirt and some flip-flops and we would go shopping dressed like that. This was considered to be well dressed so the cost of living was down, there was little requirement for heating except for a log fire or an electric heater in the short winter chilly evenings.

Would you describe yourselves as Rhodesian, or do you feel yourself to be British?

(Mrs Theobald) Well I'm British, but I was a Rhodesian as well. We're not now, we were Rhodesian Citizens while we were there. There is no Rhodesia anymore and we always considered ourselves British because of where we were born. Shirley is actually Welsh and I am English. While Son Kent and daughter Sarah are African but British through us with right of abode..

(00:37:08) So when you came back here you felt quite quickly that you became British again?

Well no, I don't think we ever stopped being British. We certainly kept our British passports, we didn't get rid of them, we were proud to be British.

(Mrs Theobald) The thing is, when we came back, my parents were living in Camberley which is six miles away from Aldershot. I came over first and managed to get a job looking after old people in a home as a manageress and cook. Dennis came a year later. Sarah came a year after me but before Dennis.

But quite quickly you felt that you adapted back to British life?

Yes. We enjoyed Rhodesia and are certain that we made the right decision to return when we did. Although we lost everything we consider ourselves to have been very lucky.

Rusty , you very much indeed for talking to me

End of interview