

Questions for ex-Rhodesian combatants – Christopher Wood

Background info:

1. Where were you born. If not in Rhodesia, why did you decide to emigrate? And why Rhodesia? What were your family links with Southern Rhodesia? What is your nationality ?

Born in Mombasa, Kenya, July '56. My father wanted to go back home and we went to Britain late '58. No family links with the Rhodesias at all. I am of 'UK' nationality.

2. What were your family links with the UK (emigration from the UK; length of time in Rhodesia; schooling/university/profession).

My father was born in the then West Riding of Yorkshire. My mother was born in Moradabad in northern India. Her father (who was a vicar) bought his family to the UK in 1948. In 1955 my father got a posting as an Assistant Agricultural Officer in Kenya and my parents went there in that same year.

Around the third quarter of 1976, I happened to watch a BBC 'Panorama' television programme. This exposed to me the 'scandal' of the Rhodesian Army recruiting British citizens. I was working as a Junior Clerical Officer in the Thornton Heath branch of the DHSS, in South London, though I was brought up in the then West Riding of Yorkshire.

I always wanted to be a soldier, specifically an Infantryman, though not a peacetime one. Therefore I did not wish to join the British Army, knowing that the situation in Northern Ireland had very little in the nature of Infantry combat. I knew that Rhodesia was under attack from a communist force, which was armed and supported by the Soviet Union/Eastern Block and the People's Republic of China.

I immediately wrote a short letter, guessing the address and sent it to Rhodesia. Within a short time I received a form to fill in. In early January 1977 I flew to Rhodesia and the official date of my joining the RLI is the 10th January, 1977.

After spending approximately five months in Training Troop, Course 156 (Regular and National Service), I joined One Commando, 1RLI. From that time I was a member of Three Troop, through to the end of the war in December 1979. During this whole period I was only in the rank of Trooper.

3. Where did you consider to be 'home'?

West Riding of Yorkshire (or County of West Yorkshire).

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

5. What did you think of white immigration/immigrants (post war? Post 1965?)
How did you view South Africa? And Afrikaner residents in Rhodesia?

I think I had very mixed feelings about South Africa, but memory is hazy about this. As for Rhodesian Afrikaners, I always viewed them as total Rhodesians and liked them a lot. Of course, we all used to rib each other about our various backgrounds.

6. When did you join the Rhodesian security forces (RLI; RAR; RAF; BSAPolice or Reserve?) Why did you join? What did your family think?

Official induction date of joining unit of 1st Bn RLI was 10/01/77. I always wanted to be a fighting Infantryman and loathed socialism in all its forms, from Fabian-socialism all the way to full-blown communism (including all the various types of national socialism).

My entire immediate family were most supportive. I think my mother was a little sad but she knew I had to do it and was very good about the whole thing.

As combatants:

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

Rhodesians (no matter what 'colour') and Western civilisation (as I saw it at the time) in general. However, after a short time in One Commando I truly considered this sub-unit to be 'home' – nothing else one can call 'home' came close to this depth of feeling. By the end of '79 this feeling was more or less dead and I felt that all was lost (I was sure that Mugabe was going to win the election with ease – several others at least in the Commando were aware of this too).

6. What/whom did you think you were fighting against?
What formed your outlook?
Media/friends/music/religion?
Was there political indoctrination/regular discussions from your commanding officers
Political discussions with your mates?

I was fighting against the 'enemy' – who were overwhelmingly ZANLA. As to what formed my outlook – that's quite a lot! However, I suppose books were always the main thing for me, and to some extent the various sources of current affairs. For example, as a nine year old lad, I was utterly horrified by the 'Cultural Revolution' that began in the People's Republic of China at that time.

I do not remember any political indoctrination whatsoever from any Officers (though there were several 'briefings' on the political situation from senior Officers, with plenty of joking). I think such a notion absurd, though am quite sure that the enemy inflicted upon themselves a vast amount of this kind of mind-torture called political indoctrination.

Some of us frequently discussed the political situation and at times at great length, though they were not group discussions as such. I would occasionally (great understatement here) have a right rant, with an audience and there were plenty of others that did this too!

7. How much understanding did you have of the war?
What were your sources of information?
How important do you think the international environment (Cold War) was in shaping your attitudes to the war/liberation struggle?
What did you think of your commanding officers?
What did you think of the 'protected villages' scheme?

Some time after arriving in Rhodesia I began to realise that I had little real understanding of the war. It was a struggle trying to come to terms with certain things. My attitude to the war was always coloured by the existence in this world of regimes/ideologies that I thought abhorrent to an extreme degree.

I thought the Officers in One Commando (and in Training Troop in my period in that) were excellent.

I hated the 'protected villagers' scheme and was not the only one in One Commando to feel this. For example, some time in second half of '78 (I think it was), we were based nearby a PV for a few days. The sight of it was dreadful (I'm sure it was the first one I had seen and can't remember ever seeing another one). One of our senior N.C.O.'s had to visit it for some reason. He came up to me after and was very bitter, describing the conditions. He really was most upset. I then reminded myself of the Boer War camps, PV's in Malaya and Vietnam and goodness knows where else. To say that my morale took a battering would be an understatement.

8. How far do you think that the war helped to create – and sustain a sense of Rhodesian identity?
What other factors do you think were important?
How much had you travelled outside Rhodesia?

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

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?

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

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

I eventually realised African nationalism was of great importance and perhaps the prime mover in the war, with the proviso what I say below about power.

The differentiation I made between the 'black' Rhodesians (whom most of us called 'civvies' or 'locals') and the 'terrorists' (whom we called 'gooks') was total. I regarded these civilians as wholly innocent and caught between the depreciations of ZANLA (who I know murdered and raped on a massive scale – especially rape) and the 'crossfire' of the Rhodesian security forces. Always felt extremely sorry for them. I know I was not the only one (in One Commando) to feel this. I know what the rest thought whenever a whole bunch of civilians were killed by the k-car (in error), for example. It was horrible and we hated that. Scenes where no civvies were present were always the most preferable, even after the time when we were not required to collect all deceased persons and load them onto various types of vehicles. Of course there is the possibility of the odd individual or so, who might not have had the same attitude.

The overwhelming majority of contacts we had in One Commando (during my time) were with ZANLA. Without doubt they were viewed as the main enemy. ZIPRA did not really fight much in this war and their incursions were on a minor scale (as far as I know), though their shooting down of the two civilian Viscounts caused great outrage.

We had very little contact with Rhodesian 'black' troops. Indeed, there was little contact between the four Commandos (sub units) of the RLI (in that we operated independently for the vast majority of the time)! From what I heard (and at least once saw on ops) of the 1st Bn of the RAR I respected them. The 'blacks' in the Selous Scouts were of special admiration even though we knew many of them were former enemy. The 'auxiliaries', supposedly of Muzorewa and Sithole (or so we heard were) were not well thought of.

I ended up thinking that the war was all about power.

Leaving:

10. When did you leave the security forces?

Did you leave Rhodesia/Zimbabwe?

Where did you go to ? Was this temporary or permanent?

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

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

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

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

Left the RLI 10/01/80. A week or so after I was back in the County of West Yorkshire. Two miserable years there, then flew to South Africa. Two (by comparison good) years living in Johannesburg, which I left in January 1984. After three months wandering about I found myself back in Yorkshire.

I found the conditions (not from a material point of view) in this country called the 'UK' to be very poor.

I have always thought that 'end of empire' (any empire from time immemorial) was/is inevitable.

Again, my view of the 'struggle' is that it was all about power. The side that I thought was the most evil (by far), won.

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

I joined the British Territorial Army some time in 1980 and was in and out of it, up to about seventeen years ago.

Additional comments: When you mentioned this Joe Skehel chap today did search and first on list was the same site! I've read the articles concerning PV's and still think that it was wrong. I wouldn't know Joe Skehel from Adam and he may be a really good bloke for all I know. I'm not disparaging him at all. I agree when I read that lives would have been saved, but at what cost? The fact is that many tens of thousands of people were forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated within a wholly unnatural environment, surrounded by a well-lighted and tall wire fence. They were not happy about this. The article mentions logistical problems. Too right! The PV I mentioned in questionnaire was new and did not have a proper water supply. It was situated on a bare hill and seemed far too crowded.

Guard Force most definately had its problems. Too much expansion in too short a time. Many, if not most, were poorly trained and were not properly disciplined. Of the 167 died I counted in list, a great proportion would have been killed in accidents or died of illness/disease. One of the articles on the Rhodesian Forces website claims that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had the highest losses for any 'unit'. A nonsensical statement. Does this include the 320 members of the BSAP who are listed as died? I don't know how many Guard Force there were present at any one time in the last few years of the war. I imagine it would have been quite a few times more than the RLI average (for combatants actually present).

I was going to say more but fear have had too much of a rant already and am well worked-up! There is far too much innaccuracy painted in life for my liking. The way 'British Nationalism' falsefies so much of the past is a pet-topic of mine - example: Churchill a hero, Chamberlain a villain. Utter rubbish. Another rant. Better go now!