Derek Van der Syde – Part One

Born in London in 1923. Travelled to South Africa to train with the SA Air Force in 1943 for one year. Went out to Rhodesia in 1959. His mother came out to join him a year later, aged 61. He married his wife in 1967, by which time he had started working in the civil service. Worked in Mozambique from 1967 for two and a half years, then in Gabon and in Lisbon. Eventually went into wildlife conservation work. Returned to Rhodesia in 1975. Left Zimbabwe for the UK in 2000.

This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Derek Van der Syde in Bournemouth on 3rd July 2009. Derek, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, where were you born and how did you come to be in Southern Rhodesia?

I was born in south London in 1923 and from an early age, having seen a film on Africa, I decided that I wished to live there. I was quite determined to because I loved wildlife and nature and when I had the opportunity to go to South Africa through the Air Force, because I was working in the air ministry and they asked me where I would like to do my training, I opted for South Africa. I went out and spent a year there under training with the South African Air Force.

Now when was this? In 1939?

No, this was in 1943

So how long did you spend doing your training in South Africa?

Just short of a year. I passed out in 1944, in July, that's my photograph there, and after spending a while in a camp at Cape Town waiting for a troop ship to return to England, I came back just before Christmas in 1944.

Where had you spent your growing years in Britain? You said you were born in 1923.

Yes, mostly in the area of north-west London where we moved to. My father had a job there and I went to school there, my secondary school as well and it was very open, rural countryside at that time, between Kingsbury and Harrow, in that direction.

Oh it would have been. Yes, open fields.

Yes, we had the fairies at the bottom of our garden probably.

Probably! So how large was your family?

There was just my elder brother and myself and of course my parents, just the four of us altogether.

When you came back after your national service down in South Africa, returning in 1944, what then? Because the war wasn't over.

I actually joined up with the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1942 while I was still at the air ministry but because of my duties there as a statistical clerk, then involved in aircrew casualties, I was kept on for a little while until I actually left (00:02:53) in 1943 and did some early training in Cambridge and at Ascot and finding myself unfit as a pilot because I didn't qualify within the time, I opted for the next thing which was a navigator bomber. Well, they called them observers in those days. So this is where I started seriously. I did my first courses of study in St Johns University in Cambridge and then after that, we went to South Africa in the Arundel Castle. We were bombed all the way through the Mediterranean and landed up in Durban, just before Christmas 1943.

So you returned from South Africa in 1944, and then what track did your life take?

Well, we were sent first to a holding unit and then to the south west of Scotland to carry on our training on advanced level operational training units, not far from Stranraer and this turned out to be aborted because the war in Europe ended in May, I think it was, 1945. It was obvious that the D-Day landings had swung things in favour of the allies and evidently we had to rely on the fact that we might become either redundant or sent elsewhere. So we were sent to another holding unit for a while and then we thought we would be sent off to Burma. And lo and behold, the Japanese had the bombing by the Americans and they capitulated and then we became the ten thousand aircrew with nowhere to go. So they said "well, become either clerk general duties or a cook or a policeman". So as I'd been in the air ministry as a clerk general duties, I opted for that and within a short while, I was based just outside Bath at a fighter squadron called Colerne where the officer in charge won the world speed record in the first Meteor. From there I volunteered for Germany and was posted on general duties to No 8 RAF Hospital, Rinteln-un-der Wesser (River Wesser) for 18 months. Returned to refresher flying training in the UK in 1948.

Yes!

Yes, while we were there and we also met Bader

Yes, Douglas Bader. Yes, I met him too.

Oh, he was a terror

Yes, he was a very determined gentleman!

Oh yes, he didn't like any slackness or errors. Oh no, he'd blow you sky high. I feel sorry for the Germans.

Well - yes

That had to look after him

When did you head back to Southern Africa then?

This was always in my mind. I came back…I left the Air Force, after about three years in Egypt, I volunteered…I was serving in the Kent area at West Malling. It's a defence squadron in Mosquito night fighters and after a while there, they resuscitated the 39 overseas night fighter squadron which was used for the defence of the Suez Canal area. I went out in September (00:06:30) 1949 and I returned on completion of my duties in 1952 about March or April. Thereafter I had four years reserve service which called me up for two weeks every year to keep my hand in navigating. This was partly with a Canberra jet fighter squadron in Hullavington, Lincolnshire, and with a Halifax Control Command Sqn. at Loch Neah in N. Ireland.

Did they call you up during the Suez crisis?

No. We were all set to invade Egypt long before then. We were sitting on the end of the runway in 1950, waiting to escort what they called the Sky Shout plane, that is, it would be going over Cairo issuing orders in Arabic, obviously, to get the people to bear with the situation because the British Forces were going to take over Egypt. I'm jolly glad they didn't because they would never have been able to hold it, it would have been a terrible mistake but we were stood down…

It shows the faith in psychological operations and in leaflet drops at the time.

Yes, that's right.

When did you go back to Southern Africa?

So I went back to - not South Africa but, well, it was Southern Africa, it was Rhodesia in July 1959. I'd spent seven years with the National Coal Board including going underground and helping with training and administration because I spoke French and German, I'd been in German occupational forces for eighteen months, so I'd learnt German there. So that was a useful point for students in an exchange between the British students and others.

But Rhodesia, when did you go to Rhodesia?

I went to Rhodesia in July 1959.

In what capacity?

My own capacity. I had no job.

Did you emigrate there or was this just a visit?

Yes, I emigrated there and the person at Rhodesia House said "you'll never get a job there, they want people who are of mechanical aptitude and you obviously have a background in clerical work and we advise very strongly not to go". So of course, that gave me the incentive. Years later, the recruitment officer and I happened to serve on the same station which was in Lisbon and I reminded him. We were very good friends by then.

So you decided you wanted to go to Southern Rhodesia. Obviously this is the time when they were encouraging British emigration to the (quasi) colony. [SR was a self-governing colony (an anomaly) with full Dominion status, attending and voting in all Commonwealth conferences. So the term 'quasi' is correct. There were fiscal and foreign relations restrictions, and it could not declare war, but was otherwise independent. Derek Van Der Syde note]

Yes

(00:09:11) **What did your family think of your decision?**

Well, I only had my brother. Let's see, in 1959, he'd already been in the Air Force and he'd been discharged after 1945 I think it was, so he was working in this area.

In which area?

The area of Wallacetown. Wallacetown is a suburb of Bournemouth and he lived at a place called Parkstone where my dear sister-in-law is still living. She's about 89 now and he lived there for quite some time and his children were brought up there and so forth. So I've got a niece living in Bournemouth.

But you talk of your brother, where was he in 1959? He was based here in Bournemouth?

Yes, he was just working in television and radio.

So had your parents died by this point?

Oh no, my parents had divorced after 19 years. In 1937 they divorced, so my father remarried and I've got two half sisters and my mother stayed single until a long time later she married an elderly gentleman in Rhodesia but it didn't work out.

When you announced to your parents, to your father and to your mother and to your brother that you were going to Rhodesia, what was their response?

Well, my father wasn't there, he was already bringing up another family by then of course. My brother was also away, I hardly saw him during the war so we were, although we were close personally, we hadn't seen one another for a long time so he didn't really have any reaction that I know of. My mother

seemed to think that sounded great and I sent for her a year later and she came out.

Oh I see. So she came to settle with you?

She retired from the civil service and came out and joined me at the age of about 61.

When you arrived in July of 1959, by boat I'm presuming? And then train up from South Africa?

No, I flew out, I flew via Ndola where they had an immigration check and they made me post a return ticket, a return amount of money, which was £140, return journey to England.

So you could leave if it didn't work out?

(00:11:41) Yes and my previous boss had said "well if it didn't work out, you can come back to us".

That was nice, to hold your job open for you.

It was, yes

When you arrived there, how did you go about finding employment?

I first of all came across a lady who was an immigration officer and I told her a little of my story. She said "well it shouldn't be any difficulty, here's the address of the public services commission in Salisbury. Go there and ask to see the recruitment officer". Which I did and I didn't know that he was one of the star batsman on the Rhodesian side. We started talking cricket and that was it. He said, well I know what you can do, you can be the paymaster and compound manager at the Salisbury group of hospitals and one of the reasons for that was that when I was stationed in Germany, I was actually in administration in a hospital for 18 months. So I had a background knowledge of hospital running and I think that may have turned the issue a little bit in my favour.

How long did you stay in that job for?

Just over a year and they sent me into headquarters after that. I'd been out actually in the hospital grounds before, in Salisbury and then they sent me to the headquarters in the middle of town where I was doing work under the director of medical services for Southern Rhodesia who happened to be a Colonel Blair. Colonel Blair had a laboratory named after him; he was most excellent as the secretary, very thoughtful, he used to see me struggling away with paper when everybody had gone and he had told me to go off home.

What a decent boss to have

Yes indeed

What did you make of Salisbury society when you first arrived there?

I found them very, very welcoming, especially to people such as myself when they found that I'd been out for a short while only. Rather narrow in outlook.

In what way?

Well, they didn't have the background of the British person for perhaps non-racial relationships but they tended to stick to their own. I don't say they were in the apartheid mode of the South Africans who believed it almost as a religion, because they really thought it would end all strivings. That was the sole reason they did it, but of course it didn't work.

(00:14:36) **No, quite the opposite**

Human nature, quite the opposite, yes

But you talk of Rhodesian society then being quite insular?

Oh yes

And also being quite grounded in racialistic habits of mind?

A little bit, yes

But at that point, surely Salisbury had expanded dramatically with an influx of people from Britain and not just from Britain?

Yes, they did indeed and this began to tell I think in their politics. I can go into that a little later on, when Sir Edgar Whitehead formed the government in Southern Rhodesia and he was very liberal but he was before his time and it didn't work out. He was once Minister in Washington and favoured bringing more Africans into Government and fostering a middle class.

So, would you say that it was much less class-bound though, when you arrived in the late fifties, early sixties, than say, British society? The Britain that you left behind.

Sorry what was the first question?

I wondered if it was as class divided as Britain was at the time?

No, I don't think so

So much more egalitarian?

They were much more relaxed and whether it was in town or in the country, farmers always came in and out. Obviously the situation was a mainly

agricultural one basically, rather than heavy industry and it was a very good cohesive community of about 250,000 whites I suppose in Southern Rhodesia at that time. Probably the most ever. There was a great degree of mutual help and good relations between black and white farmers and employers.

How much did white socialising revolved around "the club"?

Oh well, it was either round the clubs or in each other's gardens at barbeques which they called Braii-fleises. Within a week of landing and going with a couple that I had met in South Africa, in the Cape while I was waiting for ship to take me back and they gave me shelter for a few weeks, I had been invited to three different evening barbeques by that time. I was so full of beef I couldn't look at another one! In fact I'm a vegetarian now.

A lifetime's exposure to Rhodesian barbeques, it sounds like?

Well, the beef was superb of course but…

(00:16:51) **When did you join the Rhodesian or indeed, the Federation civil service?**

Well, that was in July 1959. Southern Rhodesia was actually the third component of the Federal Government. There were three prime ministers, three governors and then the overall governor general and the prime minister. So I was automatically numbered among the federal civil servants.
There was a Director of Medical Services, Southern Rhodesia, but it as a federal department.

Did you know Sir Roy Welensky?

Yes

In what capacity?

As his junior private secretary.

How long for?

For just over six months. It was generally a post where you spent six months to a year, after which you were automatically in External Affairs because he was also Minister of External Affairs. That was before it became Foreign Affairs. External Affairs was related especially to the position of Rhodesia.

When was this that you were in his…?

As far as I can recall, this was either the second half of 1962 or 1963 and at that stage, he was in touch with people like Duncan Sandys, and RAB Butler who came out and I was there when he'd finished talking to him. He came out and poor Welensky mopping his brow and saying "This man was running

rings round me". Which he was, but it wasn't the point. He was promised all sorts of things that never took place.

Or was he? Or did he…?

Well, he was promised independence but with certain conditions, of course, of the automatic upbringing, upraising of the black element because eventually they would be in the very vast majority. So it was obvious that this would have to be phased but he was promised (independence) and by Duncan Sandys also. Sir Roy got very bitter in the end because he felt that the promises were empty or else not capable of being fulfilled and Smith had the same feeling too: he was very bitter. You can read the background in Welensky's 'A Thousand Days'.

Well, a sense that the British government should have maintained, as you say, the cohesion of the Federation and that once Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland left, that Southern Rhodesia, in their belief, was entitled to independence.

(00:19:45) Yes, because it was the most developed amongst the three and this was certainly true because the largest population of white people was in Southern Rhodesia.

But what of the complicated 'A' and 'B' roll voters registration, under the 1961 constitution? After all, there was a considerable element of, let's face it, African political and economic disadvantagement?

Yes, I don't think it really caught on very much and it wasn't effective enough. Some of the Africans realised they could seize the occasion but there were too few of them I think who were able to qualify. So I don't think … as far as they were concerned, it didn't make any difference to their lives.

What was your sense of the political scene in the run up to UDI?

Well, in the run up to UDI, we all waited for the other shoe to drop. There was intense dialogue, involving the British High Commission and we knew that if neither side conceded/compromised, time was running out for meaningful negotiation.

In what form? In what way?

I was waiting. It was a weekday and we were told that there was going to a broadcast by Ian Smith about midday or so and at one o'clock the whole of the town of Salisbury came to a grinding halt. People rushed to sources of radios to listen. We listened and we heard it all and we felt a sense of other worldliness. But also a bit of relief because the tension had been so strong up until then and here was a man who believed in what he was doing was right in the sense that after long deliberation with his colleagues, they all approved and signed the Declaration of Independence, and therefore accepted the consequences. Barny Benoy, then Secretary for Foreign Affairs, informed us

briefly of the decision ahead of the broadcast, and said that it was for us to decide our future.

Later PM Wilson went to the UN and persuaded the Security Council to apply sanctions under Section 7, which was only applicable to a country that threatened world peace Some UN members felt that there was insufficient evidence to claim the foregoing, whilst others believed that the British Government should have resumed negotiation first. Again others simply did not think that the imposition of sanctions would prove feasible or effective, in bringing the Rhodesians to change and withdraw the Declaration. Personally I had a foreboding, although I did not believe that the British Government would send in armed forces. Not only was Smith a war hero, but Rhodesians, of all races had volunteered in greater numbers proportionately than any other members of the Commonwealth to help the allies in WWII. Also the cost of mounting a military take over would have been a strain on the Treasury. To be fair, Wilson did try to come to an agreement with Smith at Fearless and Tiger, and we were briefed through reports by our legal adviser, George Smith, a good friend of mine after 1980, the negotiations nearly succeeded. At the end of each day's session, agreement would have been reached, but the next day, the British team, advised by Henry Steele made a fresh set of demands, so things moved back to square one. George was completely honest, and became Mugabe's first Cabinet Secretary at 1980, when I was his PPS. Later George was made a High Court Judge, and retired thereafter. He still lives I heard in a modest house in Greendale suburb of Harare.

To return to the aftermath of UDI, only a few of my colleagues felt strongly enough opposed to resign, eg the ex Army Major in charge of Protocol, and an Under Secretary, John Bowles, and a friend who took a job with the Malawian Government. A few others thought that I would resign, and seemed surprised when I didn't. I felt it my duty to continue, in the same way as if I were still in the British civil service, because of the need for good governance. A breakdown of law and order would have left a vacuum, especially at this time of uncertainty.

End of interview – continued on Part Two