

Mike Faint

Born in the UK. Having married, he joined the Royal Air Force and was first posted to the USA. Fought in Singapore from 1963 to 1966. Flew in the Kenya Air Force from 1967 to 1972, having retired from the RAF (aged around 40 when he finished). Went to Rhodesia to join the Rhodesian Air Force in 1974. Left Zimbabwe to return to live in the UK in 2003.

This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Mike Faint in Midhurst, West Sussex on Thursday, 11 December 2008. Mike, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying, please, how did you come to be in Southern Rhodesia in the 1960's and 1970's?

It was the fault of the British government really. I was with the Royal Air Force and had served in Kenya for five years assisting in forming the first Kenya Air Force after their independence. It was glorious in Kenya, of course it was still nice after independence and it still had its lustre

So from 1960...?

1967 to 1972. I was still serving in the Air Force when we came back from Kenya. I was approaching forty at that time and my wife and I decided that we would settle and buy a house and at least have a base, instead of moving from married quarters to married quarters. We did buy the house; it was built in Boston, Lincolnshire when I was at RAF Collingsby. We had negotiated the price and the going interest rate was six and a half percent.

By the time we moved in, the interest rate had increased to twelve and three quarters percent. My daughter came back from boarding school and we tried to get her into Boston College. It was expensive so we applied for assistance. We completed the form with a view to try and get some benefit to help her, and naturally I filled it in honestly as all honest citizens do. Of course I had to tick the box that I was a home owner and state my salary that could be checked anyway because it's gazetted being a serving member of Her Majesty's Forces.

They refused me any benefit because I was a home owner and my salary should be able to afford it, but that was not the case. So I did my checking up and I thought, "No, this is not for me. I'm being penalised for bettering my way of life."

I happened to run across a friend who was out on holiday from Rhodesia and she was going back. We were just talking and she said "Why don't you come out and join us in Rhodesia?" At this time I still had eighteen months to serve to qualify for pensionable service. Although I was signed on until I was fifty-five one is allowed to waive that option at forty and quit, without losing your pension.

She sent me an application form. My intention was to go and finish, take my aircraft licences and join Air Rhodesia Airlines and go it that route. The form asked for my CV and of course I couldn't offer anything other than my military CV because I'd been an apprentice from the age of sixteen and a half in the Royal Air Force. I had, would you believe, a reply from Rhodesia House in London within three days offering me (without even mentioning Air Rhodesia) a position in the Air Force if I would care to come to Rhodesia - and it was so.

So what were you flying in the Royal Air Force?

(00:04:38) I wasn't flying, I'm an engineer, an aircraft engineer.

So Mike, excuse me, when was this?

This was 1974, late '74. But my contract with the Royal Air Force was still running and didn't finish until early '75. As soon as that came up...I just "took another job abroad" and I stayed in that job for thirty odd years. (I never actually emigrated as such.)

Right. What was the reaction of your colleagues when you told them you were going to Rhodesia?

They thought that I was mad. They said, "They've got a war out there you fool" That was not the point. To me, the war was incidental. I knew what wars were having done a stint of three years in Singapore at a time when things were very volatile so communist terrorists didn't worry me.

When had you done that, Mike?

I went there in 1963 and came back in '66. I'm an old chap

I didn't say that, you did!

So I had had that experience of insurgent wars.

How would you have had experience of insurgencies in Singapore?

Well, if you recall, the Federation of Malay states, they broke up and Singapore went independent. Sukarno was causing trouble and the whole area was in the throws of political upheaval. You also had all the Borneo stuff going on. You had the British Army and everybody in the jungle - New Zealanders, Australians as well as the Air Force.

In the Confrontation, they were...?

They were doing their bit in Malaya and again, we were supporting.

In the Emergency, yes they were

So I don't know, as a serviceman you take these things in your stride. They are things that happened. It's your job so that's how I got to Rhodesia – doing my job. I had watched the declaration of UDI on the television in 1965.

What did your wife think?

She loved it

(00:07:46) She was ready to jump at the chance...?

She always used to say "I will go where you want to go" and of course she was with me everywhere I went...This coming from my very, very first assignment I had with the Royal Air Force when I served time in California, United States of America. I was there for

thirteen months un-accompanied; my wife didn't come with me and my daughter was only six months old when I left. She was nineteen months old when I came back, so thereafter my wife accompanied me on most of my long tours. She was with me on the Singapore tour and of course the Kenya tour. She just loved every year and minute of it; and so did my daughter of course.

So you'd already spent four years in Africa so the idea of going back to Africa...?

I couldn't wait to get back to Africa. I really couldn't and I knew it wouldn't be bad

Well, compared to Boston, Lincolnshire in February. When the wind comes in from the Urals, it is a pretty chilling place

That's right and the stump does look like a stump

So this is late 1974 with your colleagues saying "you're mad"?

Yes

But your wife saying "Let's do it"?

"Let's do it", yes - My daughter was just as enthusiastic because she wanted to continue her studies and become a Vet. She never did become a Vet but she continued with her studies when we went to Rhodesia. The Rhodesian education system was tremendous, the standards were very, very high.

How did you get to Rhodesia? Did you fly via Cape Town?

No, we booked our own passage on SS Orania and sailed from Southampton to Cape Town. We had bought, from the sale of our few bits and pieces, the tickets and a new Datsun 120Y which was un-loaded at Cape Town. (The house didn't finish being sold until after we had left) We drove all the way up from Cape Town to Salisbury; it took us three days which was an adventure in itself! We arrived at the door of "Welcome to Rhodesia" in Salisbury and everything took over from there. The first thing I did was to walk into Headquarters at Milton Buildings in Salisbury. I had a good old fashioned telling off for not letting them know that I was coming. They had wanted to fly me out and put me up in a hotel but I had done all that myself!

Outrageous, showing initiative to the Rhodesians!

(00:10:52) It was very good because in the build up to going to Rhodesia, I did write to "Welcome to Rhodesia" and they told me what I really needed; what I could buy there etc. That's why I ended up buying a brand new car because cars then, were hard to come by.

Mike, I just do want to ask you, you were still formally within the RAF?

I resigned from the RAF. Prior to leaving the Royal Air Force I had a "resettlement course" of three months at the Southall College of Technology where I could turn my military qualifications to the equivalent civilian qualifications, i.e. Aircraft licences.

You had retired, I see

I was a civilian and I had now had civilian qualifications and of course all my other qualifications from the Air Force

Right, did it cause you any concern that Rhodesia was not internationally recognised at this point?

No, not at all. It was a little bit naughty of Nat West to freeze my account until I had a Rhodesia address, but it didn't cause me a problem. It was frozen until Zimbabwean independence.

So they put a block on your funds in England being transferred out to Rhodesia?

Yes

Yes, because of financial sanctions. Were your politics anything to do with your decision to go to Rhodesia as well?

Only the fact that I couldn't stand the sight of a guy called Harold Wilson

I wondered if that had something to do with it

I think the thing that really shook me and which made me in no way compatible with Socialism was the fact that I wanted to improve my life by buying my own house and settling and becoming a normal citizen and educate my child. Under a Socialist-styled government this is very difficult to do.

Had your parents been home owners?

Yes. You see, the way things were, I needed to have more money than I was earning with my salary from the Royal Air Force. I needed to put my daughter through college, my rates and my mortgage had escalated from six and a half percent to twelve and three quarter percent since the initial negotiations. I needed some extra money so I used to come off my Air Force shift and go and pick Brussels sprouts down the local farm. I'd do a half a day Brussels sprouts picking, then go to bed and then get up and go on shift. While I was picking Brussels sprouts I met guys who were local men living in council houses and living on the dole. Picking sprouts is of course seasonal work and they could go and pick piece work and earn more money. This way they were able change their car (00:13:58) every year. Once they got a new model they would trade it in for a few extra pounds the following year repeating the cycle annually....but living in a council house. I checked up with the city hall - when his bathroom roof falls in or his pan gets broken, they go along and fix it. The rub was - I was paying for that on my rates! If my pan broke, I'd have to fix it or get it fixed on the insurance and there's a little bit of injustice there.

When you went out to Rhodesia, did you think you were going there for a short term contract, or was your mental attitude of one of emigrating?

I had no intention to coming back home. Under the circumstances (joining the Rhodesian Air Force) I was fast tracked to becoming a Rhodesian citizen and I was one of the proudest people on earth to be a Rhodesian citizen.

So how long did that take?

Two years

Really, so when you arrived at “Welcome to Rhodesia,” to be given a telling off as you say, what happened then?

I was taken round headquarters and met some of the most wonderful people ever. In my Royal Air Force days I was known as Mick, Mick Faint and I was met there by a corporal who had a huge amount of medals an Australian accent. I said, “Oh, are you Australian?” and he replied, “No, I’m not an Australian. I’ve come from Tasmania, I’m from Hobart” and he was an ex-Korean war veteran.

So he said “I’ve been assigned to take you around, and get you signed in” He asked, “What’s your name?” I replied, “Mick Faint” he said, “No, you can’t be Mick. There’s only one Mick here in the Air Force and that’s Mick McLaren, he’s our commander” He walked me around and he introduced me to everybody as Mike Faint so Mike Faint I became from that day on. I was assigned to New Sarum and from then on it just was work, work, work and...

So what was your work as an engineer?

Aircraft engineer

As well as repair, was it design?

That came later. I worked in servicing, repair and modification. It was every-day routine work which you do there. At the time that we bought some new aeroplanes I moved across to where we modified them to suit our operational requirements.

You bought some new aeroplanes? Where from?

I don’t think we need to talk about that

That’s Cessna aircraft bought from France or something?

(00:17:48) Or something similar. Yes, they had to be brought up to scratch to suit our theatre. I was put in charge of the technical side. There were other consignments and in each instance there were operational things we needed to adjust. So we continued right through until independence came and I remained...

So you were based at New Sarum the whole time?

Yes, all the time. I left New Sarum to take up a position in headquarters just after independence.

So when it came to redesign or modifications, would these be the pilots coming back to you saying “you know, I’ve tried this...”?

No we had a set plan to work to (modifications) that would to turn them into a war machines.

Yes, ok so that’s reinforcement, as well as fixing gun emplacements. How many were on your team doing this?

It was quite a number really. You have to remember sanctions. One thing we've got to thank Britain for - the sanctions. Everybody was so professional; we no longer needed any help. We could go out to our own engineering industry and tell them what we required. We also had our own machine shop that could work to drawings of what we needed to be made.

As a point of interesting - after independence I was asked to call in at Rolls Royce in East Kilbride in Scotland as part of my portfolio. (After independence as an engineering officer in headquarters we had two or three hats to fill in various places where people had left) Rolls Royce in East Kilbride were most interested in knowing how we could managed to keep our Avon 1 engines going for all that length of time, bearing in mind that we had no spares back up. We used to manufacture the bits and pieces and we used to balance our own compressor blades. We had very professional engineers.

The people you were working with, your fellow engineers, were they all British emigrants?

No, the bulk were locally born. Some were "imported" and of course during the...what are we going to call it? Are we going to call it the bush war?

Yes

During the bush war, every able bodied man used to be called up and they could be used. For example, when I was in AIS I called for assistance from the people at the science department in the University. We wanted to calculate stress of a particular thing at a particular point on an (00:21:46) aeroplane - these guys came out with their stress gauges and state of the art electronics that we had at the time and we got our answers.

Because I was wondering if these Rhodesians had trained in Rhodesia or if they'd actually trained in South Africa to do their University degrees or...?

No, we had a very, very good University in Rhodesia. We also had a great many graduates from Rhodes University in South Africa who were Rhodesians. The Rhodesian Air Force also had a first class Technical Training School.

So as soon as you got there, how aware were you of the war? I mean obviously you were doing the technical side of adapting vehicles...?

Oh we were very aware of the war because everybody had to do their stint in the bush as well. You weren't molly-coddled and permitted to stay at home.

But you were in a protected profession, so you didn't have to do that?

Well no, we weren't foot soldiers of war but we did our stint at the Forward Air Fields (FAF) and wherever we went. A state of awareness permeated every facet of our lives.

Anyone travelling in Rhodesia at the time knew you couldn't go on a long distance trip without being part of a convoy and being protected. In the latter years we also used to give overhead protection (surveillance) for long convoys from, say Fort Victoria to Beitbridge, so it was a war situation. Wonderful people, everybody was in the same boat.

Mike, what did you think you were fighting for in the war?

A way of life I would say. It was a wonderful way of life for not only the white people who were living in Rhodesia but also for the blacks who were not suppressed as was propagated. You see, as a military man I can't talk politically; I don't see any politics in it, I see freedoms in it. As far as politicians go - in Rhodesia, there were very few politicians as we know politicians - the lying, cheating creatures you see in Parliament here in Britain. Ian Smith was a wonderful boss; you'd follow him anywhere because he understood what men are all about. He fought for Great Britain in WWII

Yes, RAF service himself

He flew Spitfires over Britain and over Europe. Basically he was a farmer not a politician and the war was...yes I would say, it was against communism really.

So you felt the Cold War had quite a bit to do with it?

Yes

Did you see the people that you were fighting against as being directed by the communists, or did you think that they, in any way were African nationalists?

(00:25:44) Oh very much communist directed...you see, not many people realise that in the bush war, there were three armies. Each Army was fighting two armies. We had Joshua Nkomo, who had the backings of Russia and of course we had Mugabe who had Chinese and Korean backing.

So that makes it a civil war if you've got three armies in the field?

Yes, I suppose it was a civil war, it wasn't a tribal war; it was a war for power. Although having said that, it could have been seen to be a tribal war by the other two armies as their leaders were from opposing tribes. Joshua Nkomo was Ndebele and Mugabe was Shona.

Not exclusively

Not exclusively, no, it was a ZIPRA/ZANLA but the ZIPRA Army commanded more respect than the ZANLA Army.

Did they? Why was that?

They were better fighters. I'm just talking now as I know it from the guys who fought in the bush. The foot soldiers because they would face their enemies instead of run with their AK over their shoulder pulling the trigger...They were the more conventional soldiers.

How much of that do you think, that's a construct? Saying "oh the Ndebele people are more warlike" and so therefore since they formed the backbone of ZIPRA, they're better fighters?

Well they were. They were braver and more worthy opponents. I understand they also committed fewer atrocities than ZANLA. I've seen the evidence of ZANLA atrocities as opposed to ZIPRA atrocities.

Did both sides, to your knowledge, commit atrocities?

I know the ZANLA side committed tremendous atrocities of cutting off ears, noses and lips.

Was that well publicised in Rhodesia or was that just common knowledge in the armed services?

It was common knowledge, especially in the Air Force because very often we used to have to casevac these people into Salisbury for treatment and to the hospitals because they need more specialised stuff than you can get in the provincial hospitals.

So you were seeing yourself a lot of these...?

Oh yes, they used to fly them in from the Tribal Trust lands into New Sarum Base

Mike, did you ever ask yourself how can men do this to other human beings?

(00:28:52) I asked it all the time. I still ask it to this day.

Did you ever come to any conclusions in your head?

No, no

Because it seems to me that it was an appalling level of violence but using violence as a language to try to intimidate?

The thing is, I think, it has to do with the customs of different races of people and their perception of justifiable behaviour in a war. We Europeans have evolved to a point where we wouldn't do things like that. Did you just watch the series on of World War One? I mean to say, look at the atrocities...

But the level of mutilation, that's violence to a different level? Atrocities surely were committed by all three armies who fought? I'm not saying that there were equal numbers, but I'm saying that elements within each of those armies, for whatever reason - battlefield stress, loathing of the other side - some people committed atrocities.

These atrocities as I said were the ones we saw during casualty evacuation of these unfortunate people at New Sarum. Others were word of mouth.

Did you fly them back there after they had recovered? Or did they have to make their own way back to the tribal trustlands?

Very many times they were flown back, yes. The African people were not regarded in the same light as in Kenya where the servant invariably was perceived as a possible Mau-Mau. In Rhodesia they were almost part of one's family. While I was there we had a gardener, his wife and daughter living on the property. He tended the garden, his wife worked in the house. We made sure that they were fed which was over and above their salaries. Their medical needs were also taken care of by us. We also paid for the little girl to go to school. They were just like family; they could bring their troubles to us as was customary in Rhodesia.

Do you think what had happened in Kenya was a reference point for many other Rhodesians? The sort of memory of Mau-Mau?

Oh yes, a lot of Kenyans went to the Rhodesia's, Northern and Southern. They migrated after the Mau-Mau and after independence.

Did you know people who had lived in Kenya yourself having lived there for four years? Did you know as part of your social network former white Kenyans living in Rhodesia?

No I didn't. I didn't come across them at all but I knew of them. We'd have a social gathering or something and I would mention that I lived in Kenya, "oh we were in Kenya" and then we could relate but I didn't have any prior knowledge of anybody, no.

(00:32:49) I was just wondering whether Mau-Mau acted as a sort of echo within people's...? After all, a particular type of brutal war that was misunderstood, it could be said, by the British authorities and the whites. A small number of whites who were killed in appalling circumstances, but Africans were also targeted. Whether there was a comparison that was made in Rhodesia in the '70's to that previous conflict?

No, not to my knowledge, no I didn't come across that.

Did your wife work while you were...?

No, apart from the usual help outs and some of these girls would think up something else to do, have a coffee morning or something.

So where did you live in Salisbury?

Most of us lived in a suburb of Salisbury quite close to the New Sarum base. In fact, it's quite strange - I bought that particular house from the widow of a military doctor and her favourite saying was, "we're the last of Churchill's people". She firmly believed that, for the way of life and spirit was to a great extent, WWII British!

Even now many years later you will meet a school child and they will greet you as "Sir or Madam" and they will lift their hats. At St Georges, Earl Mountbatten and Churchill schools they still wear the same smart uniforms and the salutation hasn't changed! The pupils are predominantly black now but those traditions are still carrying on.

Did you feel you were helping to build a country while you were there?

Oh yes most definitely and I've never thought otherwise. I was so surprised and proud to be part of Rhodesia because everything about it was for the future although you would sometimes think when you were listened to the radio that you were living in the past because they were still playing old records!

Oh really? What sort of records?

Oh we'd be right back into the sixties and it was tremendous.

So this is one radio station?

Yes, basically one radio station, but there were other channels we could tune into such as "Radio Jacaranda" that was aimed at the troops, majorly. (Senior moment – memory lapse can't remember the others!)

So did they have the equivalent of our Radio Two?

Yes, that's right.

(00:36:11) And Radio One played more popular music?

Yes – all the nostalgic stuff and of course they had the African programmes as well. Yes, it was good.

So how much awareness did you have of the outside world in the 1970's in Rhodesia?

A great deal; we could still get newspapers, all the various newspapers

Five days late though?

Oh yes, what does that matter, it was news. There was always news and of course we didn't have a lot of television coverage, we didn't have DSTV (satellite) until the late eighties.

Did you listen to the BBC World Service?

Yes we did, very often

So what did you feel about the reporting of the Rhodesian war?

Journalists are not my favourite people. If it's not sensational enough they'll make it sensational. We knew what was happening and we just accepted it as part of our lives - plain and simple. We didn't have huge discussions about it; you just got on with what had to be done and lived your life. Despite the fact that there was a bush war going on, we still had a good social life, the weather was great and you could still get your sporting activities in; between your work commitments.

Mike, in a way it seems that you were living something of a schizophrenic existence? You were trying to maintain a war machine, keep those planes in the skies. More and more men were being called up, the disruption of professional and family life with the need for service in the Army. As the war became more intense the war started to affect everybody and yet, as you say, people got on with their life. They socialised, they played golf?

Well, they had to – You couldn't have a situation like when you have a war here - this was not an urban war, this was a bush war. I was brought up during World War Two.

Where were you?

I was born in East Anglia. My village was midway between Harwich and Colchester so we had lots of overhead stuff with Harwich being a special target for Germany and also as we had Great Bromley close by and as you will know, the first radar stations were situated

there. So we had a “pretty healthy” war in our little old part of the UK - constantly running down and jumping underneath the shelter and things! It was nothing like that in Rhodesia and you were pretty well safe in Salisbury itself. It’s like all (00:39:59) insurgent or terrorist wars. Opportunist targets if you were outside of anywhere.

Do you remember what you thought of Smith’s televised announcement in September of 1976 that majority rule would come within two years?

’76. I’ll be very honest with you Sue, I don’t remember that or my possible reaction to it. I remember the negotiations between the Chiefs and of course Bishop Muzorewa and all that but all that it seemed to have done was intensify the efforts by Mugabe and Nkomo. The thing I remember well was the ceasefire which came about at the end of ’79 The number of people that ended up at assembly points. I’m sure many of those were freeloading; they were not part of the armies that they claimed. There were far too many.

But could that have been that perhaps Rhodesian intelligence hadn’t accurately reported the number of ZIPRA and ZANLA combatants?

Well, it would have meant that they had got it horribly wrong and I don’t think they got it horribly wrong because we needed fairly accurate figures of what’s going on.

Were you privy to that in your job?

Most of us were, yes, most of us were. We had daily situation reports and they came in from all the operational areas. This information was then consolidated and distributed to the morning briefings. The RBC would report on many of the skirmishes and especially when it concerned our boys who were being killed in the bush.

So you felt that you had accurate figures and you felt that you had a more accurate picture of what was going on?

I would like to think so. Yes, I would like to think so and I don’t think they could have fooled everybody all the time.

At that point, did you feel that African nationalism was an irresistible force on the march? What did you think of the internal settlement?

The internal settlement? Well I don’t think I can comment on that really. That was so much by way of “comings and goings” at the internal settlement we didn’t think it could last

What sort of comings and goings? In and out of the air base with politicians?

Well, these were the times when you had people like this Owen character, Lord Owen and Kissinger they were on the scene

In ’76-77? Yes he was

(00:44:10) And you couldn’t help but feel that Ian Smith was being stitched up but there again, you see I’m not a politician. I’m just an ordinary guy who was getting on with my job.

Did you at any point think, the writing’s on the wall here?

Oh yes, oh yes. You see you can't win a terrorist war

Not through military means anyway

No, not through military means, no. I don't think anybody's been successful...I think the Irish have been successful, but it's about the only one I can think of.

But if you thought, the writing's on the wall here, did you reconsider what you would do? Or did you think I'm staying here, Rhodesia's my country?

Oh yes, there was no question as I told you when we first met today, if it weren't for my second wife's wishes, I would still be in Zimbabwe now. Oh yes.

How much do you think the war helped to create a sense of Rhodesian patriotism?

Oh they had it long before the war. It was and it could have been "forever-more" the bread basket of Africa - it had everything.

But I'm thinking about a Rhodesian sense of patriotism, a Rhodesian sense of identity, everybody pulling together because of the war?

Oh yes, the war brought everyone closer but what brought them together most were the sanctions. We took "sanction busting" to another level! You've got to realise that the majority of Rhodesians were basically from British stock and that made them die-hards. We also had a fair smatterings of Italians left over from World War Two.

There was a Greek community, a Jewish community, a coloured community

Yes and of course you had your Afrikaners who had moved up as well, but it was all for one and one for all.

How united a society was it? Was it a very egalitarian or was it still divided by class?

There was no class. I found no class whatsoever. You had your good old fashioned die-hards - I mean to say you could still meet them today. I was a member of the Harare Club after I left the Air Force and at that time you could still meet the old families who came up with what they called the Pioneer Column in (00:47:35) 1896. Those families will be there forever anyway, they are so ensconced. There were also many, many wealthy people but this was not outstanding in any way - we all lived to a very high standard - higher than we might have in the UK. I never saw one white person begging until about seven years after we'd been independent.

Was there a poor white element that you knew of?

You will always have a poor white element wherever you go and many of them, once again, would be from Pioneer families but when I say "poor white" I mean they were not destitute. They just didn't live in bigger houses, like most other people. It had a very, very strong middle class but the working class whites were artisans and later immigrants.

What about the African population that you knew of? Was there an increasing middle class African population that you saw?

Oh they were becoming more and more

End of Tape

Part two talking to Mr Mike Faint

Mike, you were talking about the African class structure that you saw when you were there in the 70's

Didn't have a lot of dealing with the African other than the military African.

What level were they in the military in your profession?

We had no Africans in the Air Force other than the Air Force Regiment which like the Royal Air Force Regiment which is the back-up or the military side of the Air Force.

Why not?

Well, there was no black engineers when I first joined the Rhodesian Air Force but we were taking on engineers towards about '77/'78. but they were coming in then as local area recruits.

Were they University graduates who were...or were they local trainees?

No, just trainees. We're not going to jump ahead here but after independence we had an influx of recruits. ZANLA and ZIPRA had their guys that had been selected and sent to Romania, China, Russia and all the other places for training as engineers and pilots. At the time I was in headquarters and part of my portfolio was to get them streamed into re-training on their return.

(00:02:04) But ZIPRA and ZANLA didn't have pilots in their forces? Were they ground forces?

Ground forces?

Yes

Yes

They didn't have pilots, they didn't have an "air arm" to their...

Oh no, they didn't operate, they didn't have an operational air arm. They were moving towards that when they took over. Josiah Tongamirai, Chief of Staff said to me at the time that they had not expected to take over an "up and running" military infrastructure.

End of Tape

Part 3

Mike, you were talking about Josiah Tongamirai

Josiah Tongamirai, he came to us as Chief of Staff from the Army while we still had our last white commander. (A Pakistani took over from our white commander.) Josiah was very keen for the above-mentioned ZIPRA/ZANLA men to be absorbed into the Air Force. He gave me a tremendous amount of support when it came to sifting out the wheat from the chaff and he was very, very supportive as to what we should have. Of course, we had such high standards and it was gratifying that he felt that those high standards should remain. So as I said, he was very supportive of the plans we had and the training we offered. One of the first things that they did after independence was to bond the apprentices to stop them leaving the country, so these kids were trapped for the period. There were also a lot of white engineers who were contracted and had to serve their time. This is one of the reasons why I stayed on in the Air Force for so long after independence.

One of the things which made my position became quite unpalatable was what was happening in '83 with the Fifth Brigade because they were slaughtering innocent Ndebele.

You knew about that?

Yes, we all knew about that because some of the white pilots who were left and the white flying techs on the helicopters, they were terribly distraught about it all. It was not a nice period.

(00:02:34) **No, not at all. How many people do you think were killed during the Gukuruhundi campaign?**

Far more than has been claimed. I think the claim is about thirty thousand

Yes, I've heard that figure

I would put another fifteen thousand on top of that number but that's only from speak

That's hearsay. But going back to the period before independence, what was your experience then of blacks, Africans moving into professions, moving into urban areas. Was there a progressive breaking down of racial boundaries and of employment boundaries?

It had started. Smith himself knew this was coming about but it had to be a gradual thing.

Why? Why did it have to be so gradual?

The African takes the word "independence" literally. To them it meant and means that they are now independent of the rules and norms that the "Colonialists" had imposed. So, as a result if you were for instance hospitalised in, as it was called then, the Andrew Fleming, you were entitled to take the sheets, the pillow cases, the towels and whatever else took your fancy....all these things disappeared or were disappearing on a huge basis because "there were no more rules". At all the golf clubs, there used to be piles and piles of towels, deodorants and shampoos available in the showers; they all disappeared overnight by being pilfered and taken and you see, that's a way of life. To them there's no crime in it, it's a cultural thing. We're talking about understanding the culture of Africa ...We are brought up in our culture to respect, to have ethics, to have integrity; that does not exist in their conscience as it does in our conscience.

You're applying that as a blanket thing though?

Pretty well yes, you can't help but apply it as a blanket. Later on in my life when I was getting my business up and running and come across the middle class families, they, having had the opportunity of being exposed to our ethics and the various foibles of our culture were beginning to practice it and it does make a lot of difference. To take somebody who has not used a conscience consciously...are you with me so far?

Yes

And to just expose them...they don't know how to handle it. I had a dear old friend who was a senior police officer in the BSAP (went to Africa from UK at the end of WWII) He and I used to sit down on a Monday evening and have a pint up at the Senior Police(00:06:53) Officers mess. He used to shake his head and say, "Our biggest trouble Mike, is that we've got Stone Age people in a space age world" We had people coming in from the TTL's who had never been exposed to every-day city life. Unable to find a way of earning a living they turned to the next best thing which was to steal. It's a cultural thing.

I think it's also, as you point, socio-economic factors, because these are subsistence peasant based communities with different structures, different practices - then to be catapulted into an urban existence with as you say, modern technology and the skills. I think about my son moving from rural Dorset to London where he feels totally, totally deracinated

Yes, I can imagine

So I was thinking of huge, huge shifts and pressures that creates on societies going through industrialisation, going through modernisation. I don't think that's necessarily just culturally different for African and Europeans.

The experience I had gained in Kenya I took with me, in my head, to Rhodesia.

Living in Kenya for five years where part of my remit was to recruit technicians for the Air Force; I used the Mission schools in their Tribal Trust Lands where there were very, very highly educated young men with 'A' level, this is Cambridge exam 'A' level certificates.

Yes, Cambridge board

Now you're interviewing these guys because they would make damn good engineers as they've good science, physics and maths - all the basic bits and pieces you need. The moment you ask them to do... they've never held a spanner, so you say to them, "Well, don't you help your dad? Has your father got a bicycle?" "No Sir, we walk to the village, we walk to here". He has had no experience of the mechanical that one has growing up in a city. Your dad's got a car or a bike or he's fixing a fuse or something. These kids, they study by lamp or candlelight and they take their exams and they have a tremendous memory capacity. Most African languages didn't even have the written word until the late 1800's, so all their tribal histories used to have to be...

Is oral

Be stored there (points to head): as the Shona say, "When an old man dies, a library dies." All that knowledge has gone forever. You have to remember that they hadn't had the exposure that the average person has had to something mechanical. When it comes to applying the knowledge of they have acquired from books, they find it very hard to apply.

But were you seeing an emerging African middle class in Harare at that time?

(00:11:07) Sue, I wasn't exposed to it at that time

No, ok, that's something that you were aware of post independence?

Post independence, in fact it is now one of their problems. Well, one of the biggest problems - they've got such a large middle class now who so settled in their comfort zone that they'd rather not rock the boat! They would prefer not have Mugabe.

I've used this analogy with others of your colleagues "it's the frog in a saucer of water which is being slowly heated. The frog won't jump out until the water reaches boiling point, and then it's too late. It's slow, it's insidious and the frog doesn't notice. " I think it's a very powerful analogy.

Mike, you and your wife and daughter made the decision to stay after independence?

Oh very much so, yes

Would you consider yourself a Rhodesian or a Zimbabwean?

Well don't forget I've moved with the times. I changed my Rhodesian passport for a Zimbabwean passport

Did you?

Yes I did

Did you keep your British?

I did keep my British one. I was still in the Air Force when I change my passport from Rhodesian to Zimbabwean. Zimbabwe then decided that we couldn't have dual, so the British High Commission actually posted my British passport back to me with a little note stating that I must remember the Zimbabwe government does not allow dual citizenship.

Well, they'd informed you!

So I kept my British passport and it turned out to be quite useful. In fact it was very useful as I travelled a bit with Josiah Tongamirai to Spain, Italy and of course to Britain. So it made a little bit of difference on the travel side of things.

Yes, did he ever remark that you were travelling on your British passport?

Well, yes, because I used to remark to him that he was travelling on a diplomatic passport - something I didn't have. I just had an ordinary Zimbabwean passport (00:14:04) that meant I would have to join the alien queue instead of having a chance to go through the other queue.

That's the EC queue

Yes that's right, so it's seemed that the Zimbabwean authorities chose to turn a blind eye to the fact that I was using my British passport!

So Mike, when did you leave? Well when did you come back here to this country?

I really came back to this country to live in 2003. I didn't intend to live here but my family circumstances brought me back. I still consider myself a Zimbabwean although I don't have Zimbabwean citizenship any longer. In 2002 Mugabe demanded we all hand our Zimbabwe passports back before his presidential election.

Looking back, I have asked all your colleagues this; the Rhodesians I have spoken to said they can divide their friends into those who felt that the struggle was worth it, the war was worth fighting and those who say "no it wasn't". Where would you place yourself?

I wouldn't have been there if I thought that it wasn't worth fighting for. Oh it was definitely worth fighting for: not just for white Rhodesians, for black Rhodesians as well. I mean to say, history is showing what we were fighting for...

How much, at the time, was your commitment? Your sense of 'This is worth fighting for'? Sustained by what you believed the majority of Africans in your knowledge also wanted, that they didn't want the terrorists to win. I'm just wondering whether this belief that you were fighting for a multi-racial Rhodesia.

The only time I had chance to assess that was after I had left the Air Force and joined commerce and industry. I had factory and employed about 93 people - Administration and Technical people or workers. The Zimbabwe government had put a lot of unnecessary restrictions into place and of course it made doing business very difficult. When the blacks complained about the government to me because they thought it was too harsh I would tell them, "Well you were the guys who put Mugabe there. You could have had Bishop Muzorewa. You could have picked any of the others but you put those guys there" Their reply was "We had to vote for Mugabe otherwise the war would have gone on and we didn't want any more war". And that, I would say, was the attitude of 80-85% of the people. They voted that way, to stop the war.

I've heard that. Bertie Cubitt made the comment that, as a BSAP person, that he had observed the vote going over three days and he had heard of communities being told "we will know because the first day is for Mugabe; the second day then went out then it's for Mugabe". In other words, to try to identify those who were prepared to vote for the other side.

(00:17:55) Yes, exactly

Mike, what did you think about the end of empire? Did you feel that you were part of, in fact, an element of the British Empire? Building that new country? Drawing on the best of what was British, or did you think that you were part of something else when you were there in the seventies?

I didn't think it was an empire thing at all, Commonwealth, yes, but definitely not empire. It was such an incredible place to be ... beautiful standards as I've said before of politeness and courtesies and all the things I grew up with as a boy – they were all there, everything was there, nice people.

How did you find coming back to this country, apart from the weather?

Disgusting, absolutely disgusting, it was terrible. People my age when you came across them in the supermarkets were discourteous, thinking the world owes them a living. Nobody holds a door open for a lady to go through any more. Nobody stands up for them on a bus or a train. The language is foul in the street as well as on the television. I've heard it said that it's a broken society and I believe it.

So you don't see any plusses to how Britain has changed?

No, no I think Britain has gone, If you want a fine example of strides into a one party state, it's here now. Parliament's a joke.

I think that Tony Blair's switch to having a Prime Minister's questions only once a week really was an erosion of democracy. It sidelined Parliament and that was wrong.

Yes

I do think that.

Yes, how anybody can believe anything they say is...it's just a joke

Mike, thank you very much indeed for talking to me

End of interview