

Colin Bewes

Colin's father was a policeman in Nyasaland and retrained as a pilot in order to move to Rhodesia with their family in 1966, when Colin was aged 5. He left school in 1979 and went straight into National Service in the BSAP. He left the police force and Zimbabwe in 1981.

This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Colin Bewes on Tuesday 11th November in Teddington. Colin, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me. I wondered if you could begin by saying how did you and your family come to be in Rhodesia in the 1960's and 70's? Did you have any family links with Southern Rhodesia beforehand?

Right, well my father was a pilot. Actually he was originally a policeman in Nyasaland which is now Malawi and when Malawi attained its independence in I think it was 1964 or 5, he stayed on in the police force but it was in charge of investigating political detainees. Unfortunately he always came up with the wrong conclusions that the suspect had actually not done anything wrong but the conclusion he was supposed to come up with was that he'd offended such and such a minister and so on. My father saw the writing on the wall, retrained in his spare time in Rhodesia, made various trips to Rhodesia and trained as a commercial pilot. So in 1966 we moved to Rhodesia and I stayed there until I was 19 or thereabouts.

So how old were you when your family moved to Rhodesia?

Well I think it was 1966 so I'm not entirely sure of the actual date but that would have made me about five.

Do you remember arriving there?

I remember the trip from South Africa because we actually did a very roundabout trip to England and then down to South Africa, the purpose of which was to take a car with us which supposedly we were going to keep in South Africa. But we actually took it all the way to Rhodesia.

So your father worked as a pilot?

Yes, he started off in the RAF in the UK and didn't do too well. I think he crashed a Harvard trainer and was also involved in making rockets which destroyed the OC's office so he was taken aside and told "you're not going to go very far in the RAF, why don't you transfer to colonial service?" which he did.

For whom did he work when you moved to Rhodesia?

When we moved to Rhodesia he got a job with a company called Skywork at Charles Prince Airport which I think is either south or west of Salisbury.

Where did you go to school in Salisbury?

Well, initially I went to Alfred Biet School which was a primary school. My parents found that I wasn't doing terribly well there, I wasn't being pushed (00:03:00) enough and they dipped into their pockets and found the money to send me to Springvale which is a private school near Marandellas.

When did you leave school?

Springvale was the junior school so I stayed there until 1974 and then I got a minor scholarship to Falcon College which is near Essexvale or Esigodini as they say now and that's about 35 miles outside Bulawayo.

End of tape

Part two

Did you go straight from school then into National Service?

Yes, I literally had about ten days holiday when I left Falcon in 1979 and I'd already signed up with the British South Africa Police having considered that against the alternative options of the Army or the Air Force. The Air Force demanded about ten years of your time which I didn't really have to give especially knowing that there's going to be political change in the country and the Army paid you peanuts and if there was still a war on you were going to be cannon fodder. Well, that was my view at the time anyway.

Did you have brothers who were also conscripted into the armed services?

Yes, when you say 'conscripted', I was actually a regular policeman because you either did National Service in the police or you were a regular policeman where you signed a two year contract. It used to be three year contracts and that's why people talk about "doing their three in the BSAP". So my brother and I were both regulars; there was actually a bit of looking down from the regulars to the National Servicemen probably quite unjustified. He went into the police in 1977 and came out, I think, the day before it changed to the Zimbabwe Republic Police. He was stationed in Inyanga and also did stints at Nyamaropa and Ruangwe and he was in Special Branch/Ground Coverage which was all about running informers.

Did you talk much to him before you joined of what his work involved?

I tried to but I didn't get much out of him. He's a quiet bloke anyway and he just didn't talk about his work.

Where were you sent, to start with during your time in the BSAP?

Well, we were designated as a mounted squad so that meant that we had to learn horses and equitation and many horrible mornings mucking out horses

at 4.30 in the morning and getting kicked by them and thrown off them and gradually learning how to ride them, first without stirrups and then with stirrups; then eventually we were at the standard where we could do a full (00:02:52) escort, 32 horse escort and also do some musical dances on horses.

What was the background of the war at this particular point?

Right, well when I signed up, when I joined the BSAP, the ceasefire had been signed although I believe the war carried on rumbling along with some breakages in the ceasefire. We were due to pass out of Morris training depot in about April but because we were an equitation squad, they kept us on till about August so we didn't actually see any of the war at all except for a very short (stint), it wasn't really a war. After we'd done the independence celebrations on horseback where we escorted Prince Charles and all the dignitaries to Government House then to Rufaro stadium they sent us on police display which is basically the police showing off its prowess as horsemen and motorcyclists and putting on a show. It's a bit like the tattoo at Edinburgh. They sent us to Umtali, Marandellas, Bulawayo, Fort Victoria and so on to put on this display and in Marandellas I remember we were diverted in riot gear to look after a crowd of Africans who were being a bit mutinous.

Did it ever strike you as really rather surreal that while the war was coming to an end and there was transition to independence, there you were training as part of the mounted police force learning equitation skills and, well, public display techniques?

Yes, I can only guess that they wanted to start promoting the police force as an organisation that people would want to join and before the war started in earnest, they used to have this display every year and I guess it was a case of resurrecting it.

Were they all Europeans in your training squad or were there Africans too?

No there were probably about five Africans, I mean the squad was only about twenty strong and to form the 32 man escort we had to have two squads and in my squad there was probably about five Africans and two or three of mixed race.

Where was "home" for you at this time? If you said you could see the writing on the wall, as suggested before we started the interview...

Well, I'd grown up in Salisbury in a fairly nice suburb of Salisbury called Mayfield Park and I guess at that point I didn't have any assets so I could think about my future in terms of virtually anywhere I wanted to go because I could always get an air fare off my mother and travel to the UK. I knew I had a British passport so I had rights of abode in the UK and it was a question of weighing up did I want to try and make a career in Zimbabwe as it was going to be or in the UK.

Did you talk much to your parents about this?

(00:06:36) Well, there was only my mother then because my father had died in 1977 but about a year or two before I'd joined the police, my mother had taken me to some aptitude testing in London and they came up with the answer that they thought I should be a journalist or something in advertising or publishing. Basically talking to my mother about careers in those sort of fields there wasn't much prospects in Zimbabwe of making a successful career, certainly in advertising which is the career I chose. She actually had a word with someone she knew in one of the main ad agencies in Harare and said "what's the chances of taking on my son as a trainee?" and the chap there said "absolutely no chance at all because everything's changed now, we have to have a reverse policy of discrimination".

So this was before independence? During the Muzorewa era?

This was just after independence so I would have been talking to my mother about career options probably in late 1980, early 1981 and things had all changed.

When did you leave Zimbabwe?

I left Zimbabwe in July 1981. I'd actually left my police station a month earlier, I think it was June 30th. I'd persuaded my brother to fly a light aircraft all the way from Bulawayo, land on the local airstrip and take me away into the sunset which mightily impressed the Sergeant Major I'd persuaded to take me down there. So I had a bit of a holiday in Harare and flew out to the UK just before the Royal Wedding on the 29th of July and so I watched that with my grandmother in Tunbridge Wells.

Was that your maternal grandmother or your father's mother?

My maternal grandmother

Where did your mother regard as "home" all that time, from 1966 up to independence?

Well, she had been part of a very colonial family in that her father was in the colonial audit service and she herself had been born in Kenya. My grandmother had been born in India so they were well used to going to Cyprus, Zambia, Malawi, Gold Coast I think they went to, Kenya they spent time in.

Was your mother in Kenya in the 1950's?

Yes

Do you remember her ever making a comment about whether she felt there were parallels between what happened in Kenya and what was happening in Rhodesia in the 1970's?

(00:09:51) She may have mentioned something about that I mean I'm not sure, when was the Mau Mau rebellion?

In the 1950's, 1952 to 1958

Right, I don't think she was actually in Kenya at that time, she was more sort of towards the 56 to 63 but I don't think she really drew that many parallels.

How long did your mother stay in Zimbabwe?

She stayed up until about five years ago and we kept on pleading with her to make a new life somewhere else like Australia which eventually she did.

So your brother had left too?

Yes

So where did he settle?

He did some flying in Zimbabwe with Afretair... (because he trained as a pilot as well) and he first of all joined the company my father flew for eventually which was United Air Charters. Then he flew for the African Development Fund and eventually got the job with Affretair. I don't know if you know but Affretair's what was Air Trans Africa, which was run by Jack Mallock who was the sanctions buster extraordinaire. So he was flying DC8's all over the world bringing in things like all the toilets for the new Harare Sheraton and he certainly had a few different ID cards depending on which country he was going to fly into.

It must have been interesting on occasion to keep that straight

So round about the mid 80's he got married and then unfortunately decided he was going to give up the flying and go and train at a Bible school, which he did, in America. Came back and found that it didn't pay very well and went back to flying and unfortunately had a stroke when he was 31 which kind of put paid to his flying career. He then stayed doing various jobs in Zimbabwe until about 2000, then he moved back to Australia because he'd done a year or two in Australia I think in 1989 or thereabouts.

Would you describe either you or your brother as "Rhodesians"?

I don't think so. I mean, I tell lots of people I grew up in Rhodesia but I don't actually say "I'm a Rhodesian" because I regard myself as too English for that. Having said that I'm immensely proud of what Rhodesia was and I wouldn't give up my childhood there for anything.

Do you remember at the time whether you felt that 'This is my home, this is Rhodesia'? Do you remember thinking through your teen years whether this was actually "home"?

(00:13:09) I think I probably always knew I probably wasn't going to stay in Rhodesia, but it wasn't a completely final thing because I didn't know which way the war was going to go until quite late on. If it had gone a different way then maybe I would have stayed, I don't know but having two parents who are very English and the fact that we were British passport holders, I knew I didn't have to stay in Rhodesia.

Did your mother work after your father died?

Yes, she had various secretarial jobs at various solicitors and she ended up as the receptionist at the Royal Salisbury Golf Club, or the Royal Harare Golf Club, so a very plush golf club.

Did many in your mother's social circle leave at independence?

I think it was a sort of trickle, a sort of steady trickle which went on for about twenty years and eventually it was the loss of friends which persuaded her to move to Australia.

And that's where she is now?

Yes, she's in Toowoomba where my brother is as well.

Looking back Colin, would you say that the war, the struggle was worth it or not?

I think it was worth it in the sense that we were making a stand against communism. I mean I know that the black historians will say that it was all actually about liberation, but the truth was that those liberation movements were being used by the Soviet Union and Communist China.

What shaped your views?

Well I guess it was a case of reading newspapers at school, watching the TV broadcasts. Yes I don't deny there was probably a bit of propaganda there but in retrospect I've read very widely on the subject and I don't believe the propaganda was that severe. I still believe it was a case of the Soviet Union and Communist China using those liberation movements.

Were you mostly reading and listening to Rhodesian newspapers? Rhodesian radio broadcasts?

Yes when I came over to the UK, yes I watched the news there as well but when you see news reports of tanks rolling down the streets of Salisbury and you know it's not happening then something's got to be wrong. I mean at school we had a fairly wide range of other magazines like Newsweek and The Economist which we were encouraged to read. So yes, we did have a fairly broad world view.

So that was very much inculcated at Falcon?

(00:16:20) Yes

To have an interest in world affairs?

Yes

What other values do you think Falcon...?

Apart from anything else I did an economics 'A' level and The Economist was required reading, you had to read it from cover to cover.

Yes, so did you listen to the BBC when you were in Rhodesia?

Yes, I used to listen to the BBC World Service occasionally, more often to LM radio, it was just one of the...

So in your view then, the Cold War context was critical in shaping how the war was fought?

Yes and my view was probably that of many Rhodesians that it..., sorry I'm calling myself a Rhodesian then! Many people in that country at the time that if we didn't make a stand then, who would?

What did you think of South Africa at the time? Can you remember?

Well I always thought that they were 100% behind us. Of course in retrospect I've realised that they weren't and they were mainly looking after their own interests and having a buffer zone.

Do you remember thinking at the time, this is actually a Civil War? You mentioned about you were fighting a war against communism so that suggests a rather different construct to the type of war you were fighting?

I can understand why it was called a Civil War but...I don't really know the answer to that question, to be honest.

Your colleagues have all commented on the extent to which they were confirmed in their views by the active participation and collaboration of the African members of the BSAP, African members of the security services. What's your view on that?

We couldn't have done it without them. Maybe I didn't realise this quite as much at the time but reading since then, since I left there there's no way we could have done it without them.

Did you remember talking to other members, the other African members of the training squad on why they joined up to the police?

(00:18:44) Yes I think it was mainly because they wanted a good job and they saw the police as a good employer, good prospects. As it turned out, even better prospects than they might have thought but, yes basically it was a good job.

Yes, so at that point it would have been building a new Rhodesia/Zimbabwe?

Yes

Yes, so a different point to others who joined earlier?

Yes

How important is the BSAP organisation for you here? You mentioned that you were only in it for a very short time and yet I'm very struck by your identification with it.

Yes, I was only there for eighteen months. It's funny that I actually left the force three weeks before they set up the 5th Brigade at the army camp in Inyanga which was literally five minutes away from the station so I regard it as a fairly lucky escape. But yes, only eighteen months in the force, I guess it was such an intense experience that every day was different, you were doing investigations into maybe someone who'd been dragged from a river or someone who had been involved in a RTA or doing riot control, all these different things. You were also being expected to lead without much experience; your first day at the station you'd be put in charge of a constable or two or have to go and investigate things without much help and then to construct reports after you'd done the investigation and then prepare the evidence so it could be prosecuted in court. A lot of this you'd learnt maybe from asking your colleagues how to do it, but a lot of it was just pure initiative. So yes, the intensity of that experience meant that I guess it seemed like eighteen months was more like ten years.

Yes, so a real high point in your life then?

Yes, I mean obviously there are parts of which I didn't enjoy at the time but you tend to forget all the bad parts and remember the good parts, like the police pub.

So what were the good parts?

Well, I guess the good parts were, you know, when you had done say a three day patrol which went very well and you'd put in a good report and you got praise for that. The camaraderie with the other policemen there and we had a pub on station which was called The Bodybox because the drinks cabinet was a coffin. An upright coffin with shelves put into it. It was tiny, there was only room for about ten or fifteen people but beer was about 25 cents a bottle and we had a good time there.

(00:21:56) **Colin, thank you very much indeed for talking to me**

Post-script on feelings of being at Falcon during the bush war (isolation; your older brother on active service). You also mentioned that you were on the mounted squad for Prince Charles during the independence parade, and your feeling on learning of the botched assassination plan.

Whilst at Falcon I did worry almost daily that my brother was going to be killed, particularly as he was stationed on the border. We did hear from time to time about other ex-Falcon boys who had been killed in action and we read every day in the Chronicle (a Bulawayo newspaper) about soldiers and policemen who had also been killed in the war. As for myself I was constantly surprised that the school was never attacked, but then each time the thought occurred to me I remembered the fact that there was an Army camp a mile or two down the road from us so only foolhardy gooks would have tried.

I found out years later about the plan to get rid of Mugabe at the celebrations in Rufaro Stadium. One part of me obviously says Thank God it never happened, whilst the other looks at the state of Zimbabwe today (2010) and wonders if perhaps they should have gone ahead, even if I had been one of the casualties. However, the history of the previous ten years or so suggests that COMOPS would have been blamed by the world at large, international recognition would probably have been withheld and who knows what monster might have stepped up to the void left by Mugabe, even assuming for a minute that he would not have survived.