

Fred Punter – Part Two

For brief biography, see Part One.

This is Dr Sue Onslow talking to Mr Fred Punter on Tuesday, 4 November at the London School of Economics. Fred, thank you very much indeed for coming back to talk to me. I wonder if you could begin by saying please how long did the BSAP stay the front line in the war that developed in Rhodesia?

The BSAP always were the right of the line. They were the first line of the country's defence and really this never in theory stopped. However the fighting of the war was controlled by the joint operations centres which were Army, Police and Air Force and it was a joint decision as to what would happen; depending on what the job in hand was, what the circumstances were would depend on what unit would take the role. Obviously if it was going to be a large Fire Force exercise then it would be the Army but the police were always there in a PATU role to back them up but on many occasions the incidents were attended to entirely by BSAP PATU sticks.

The image or the picture that you're presenting then is of the BSAP sliding into this conflict, but its intelligence gathering role being of critical importance?

Yes, we slid into it gradually. It just sort of ...it became something that we were required to attend to more as the time went on. The intelligence gathering in the uniformed branch was initially continually done by Ground Coverage which was then fed through to Special Branch; the majority of other intelligence gathering which was fed through to people like the Selous Scouts and the Army was also done by Special Branch. In fact as far as I can recall, the fighting army men preferred to work with Special Branch on Special Branch information than their own military intelligence.

So that then suggests two principal lines of intelligence gathering: one, the ground coverage operators and secondly SB's role in interrogation?

The Ground Coverage was country wide spread out throughout the urban and rural areas with small teams of comparatively junior men gathering titbits of information that were fed back. They then went to Special Branch who would analyse that and they would then possibly send one of their operatives out to look at that situation if it looked as if it was developing into something of importance.

As I understand it then, ground coverage operators would be principally African but have a white officer as an integral part of that information gathering?

That would be the team.

Yes

(00:04:22) Yes the majority of the ground coverage people were Africans: mainly constables, sergeants and they would be patrolling, going out in plain clothes in many instances and they would be supervised by a patrol officer

Who was always white? Did you have black patrol officers?

We did have black patrol officers but not until the very late 70's. The government considered it...although there was the opportunity for blacks to apply to become patrol officers it was government policy not to select them.

So just picking up on your point about Special Branch and its contributory role to intelligence gathering and interrogation, I've heard mention of 'forts' as centres. Do you mind elaborating on that?

The forts were all out, well not all, I think there was a fort at Chikarubi which was in town but the majority of the forts were in the rural areas attached or located very close to a JOC or a sub-JOC. Many JOCs and sub-JOCs were situated near to an administrative centre or an air strip. These forts were enclosed areas: generally the outside walls would be twelve feet high made of corrugated iron, no windows and the door would be just the same and...

How big a structure are you talking about?

The size of about four tennis courts-ish and there would be buildings inside, smaller temporary wooden buildings

End of tape

Part Two

Fred, if you could continue please with your description of the forts

Inside the forts there were buildings, offices. These were mainly wooden temporary structures which could be moved quite easily and the forts were an area where Special Branch would have their offices and together with the Selous Scouts and any other army units who were working on clandestine operations. If they were all blacked up or something like that and they would work out of the fort.

So the interrogations themselves were they done principally by African members of the Special Branch?

They would be done by a team mainly but with one white and one black generally although it wouldn't be unusual for a white Special Branch guy to say to his black companion "well you have a chat with this guy, see what you can get" because obviously not all white Special Branch officers were fluent in all the languages that the suspects might talk. So therefore they would get

more information, possibly quicker information from someone who was speaking their language.

(00:01:38) What about the use of force in interrogation? Was there a rule book governing this?

There was not a written rule book as such; but certainly the theory would be that there was no torture or beating. But obviously who can say whether that happened or not. I daresay from time to time it did happen but I can honestly say that I never received any complaints from anyone to say "I was beaten during interrogation", possibly because they never had the chance to complain.

This is a society in which capital punishment is formally on the statute book. What was the role of corporal punishment on that statute book? I'm trying to situate caning/use of force in a context

Yes, hanging was enforced. Not a great deal of executions took place as far as I recall but yes, hanging was still in place. I can recall that certainly in the 50's and 60's that magistrates awarded a punishment of six cuts with a light cane. I can recall seeing it on the judgement papers: six cuts with a light cane. How long that continued for I honestly cannot recall whether it was still in force right up until 1980, I don't know, but it could possibly have been.

Do you have any knowledge of the role of caning in customary Rhodesian African courts or in tribal law?

As far as I'm aware, corporal punishment was not a part of African tribal law. I must say I'm not very well up on African tribal law. I've met quite a few African Chiefs. I've been to their kraals and things like that and I've camped at their kraals, but I've never heard of Chiefs giving a physical punishment.

Fred, what percentage of the Rhodesian security forces were African?

Overall, it would be a stab in the dark, but as far as I recall in the police force the strength...we're talking about regular policemen as opposed to police reserves. There were about two to two and half thousand white officers and about twenty thousand blacks so that's about 10% were white.

What do you think or how did you see their reasons for joining the police force? For participating in the security services?

Before there was any terrorist activity the police was regarded as a very good job. It had a certain position in society and you had to be a little bit more intelligent than the next person to be accepted into the police; plus the fact it gave you accommodation, uniform, good living conditions and generally it was a very good job for them. Their pay was not great but it was great in their terms and so when the war came they slid into it the same as the whites did. But obviously there were the odd one or two of them that were not supportive of the situation, but by and large the majority were against the terrorists.

Do you remember discussions with them about it?

(00:06:45) Yes, yes, as I got promoted you get further away from it and so my discussions with them would have been when I was an Inspector which would have been in the mid 60's and the stations I was on. We had a very good working relationship with the African policeman and they certainly... we were unified. Although they were black and we were white and we probably got a lot more money than they did and we were in charge of them, there was not any obvious resentment; you were all in a team together and even now you will find former members of the police force who still think highly of the black constables that they worked with in the old days and will talk highly of them.

By the mid 70's, Fred, you were the welfare officer for the BSAP?

Yes, for three years in the end I think it was

So you saw, shall we say, the troubled side?

I saw a lot of it, yes

Something I'm interested in exploring is how individuals in stressful situations cope with those situations. It seems to me that in the Rhodesian case the role of humour was very much there. How accurate would you say that was?

I would not be looking at that from the welfare officer's point of view. I would be looking at that from being one of the guys in a stressful situation and certainly there was laughing and joking to ease the tension that existed during the work. You didn't joke about it frivolously in a duty situation but off duty then certainly it did become one of the ways of releasing the tension and the pub was the other place. Well, of course the pub and the humour went together and nearly all police stations had their own pubs.

So were you seeing alcoholism from the welfare officer's side of it? Alcohol abuse?

No, no surprisingly there was little of that because I think in the majority of cases that where in a forward station, where there was a pub, all ranks would be drinking together. If one guy was getting a little bit over the top then one of the senior guys there would say "I think you should knock it off" but no, there were a couple of guys who were inclined to drink a little bit more than they should but they were the sort that would have done it under any circumstances and it was not a process from the operations. One of the things of course that, going completely off your point but connected with my welfare duties and the pressures of the war were when PATU guys were called up from their stations, married guys and sometimes, or they were doing other duties away from their stations, leaving their wives behind, there was quite a bit of infidelity.

I was going to ask about marital strains and stresses and break-ups?

(00:11:40) That was a problem. I actually voluntarily trained as a marriage guidance councillor and found that that experience was very valuable and spent a lot of time counselling and sorting marriages out at all levels.

Thank you for that, Fred. So thinking then about the contribution of white members and the strains in that element of society, this isn't a static white Rhodesian group because there are immigrants arriving, but also there is a picture of people leaving. So that suggests a relatively unstable society, if people had the opportunity of emigrating?

There was no embargo on people emigrating but there was the percentage of people leaving and arriving was relatively small. Of course you've got to go back to 65 and UDI when sanctions were imposed and people then thought "well, we're not going to give this up" and developed local products to meet the shortfalls in a lack of imported products and the Rhodesian white community became more self sufficient, more self reliant and more of a cohesive unit so that when the war started initially anyway..."We've overcome UDI, you're not going to chase us out with this" and so it was the amount of people that left was very, very small.. There were people arriving; we had quite a few Americans, even French people coming in to join the police and the army because they felt that they were helping to keep communism at bay.

So those who left then in the 1970's can they be identified as from any particular profession? From any particular walk of life?

Oh I don't know

I'm asking you because you're presenting a picture of relative solidity in the police force. And yet emigration, it's been argued, was a factor in undermining the structures of the Rhodesian state.

There were people leaving the police and there were people leaving the normal white population. I haven't got the figures but I don't think that they were that large in number. It was not until towards the very end of the war that the total white population really started to reduce to any significant number. I think when it was at its highest the white population was something like 250,000?

It went up to 278,000 at one point and then settled back down to about 255,000

Yes and I don't know what it was in 1980 but to the average man in the street it wasn't a noticeable reduction.

The reason I'm asking that is because I've read that in the early 70's the Rhodesian Herald had an article entitled " a hole in the bucket" implying the numbers, that there was a steady drain of whites and their skills that they believed to have had, was affecting the viability of the Rhodesian state. So that's why I just posed that question.

(00:16:32) Yes well there may have been some skills that left. There were a few Jewish Doctors but then in many instances they were the sort of people who were either retiring and it was not an uncommon thing before the war. For a long time for Rhodesians to retire to the Cape, you worked all your life in Rhodesia because you knew you were going to retire to the seaside and there were people who did that, but they were the people that would have done it anyway.

Fred, in the slide into war as you've described it by both the European and also the African community, I wonder, the emphasis in the literature which stresses the use of violence against societies by ZANLA by ZIPRA forces. Were there also instances of rape as a weapon of war?

Yes there were quite a lot of reports of violence against the ordinary African tribal people living in the tribal areas and this included instances of rape. But as a percentage? I couldn't put a figure on it at all but certainly it existed and I think that both ZANLA and ZIPRA were equally guilty. ZIPRA of course delighted in doing it to Mashonas and ZANLA delighting in doing it to Matabeles

So was it confined to any particular area or it depended very much on the particular group?

There was the north east was certainly a ZANLA only area and ZIPRA wouldn't countenance going into that area at all and northern Matabeleland was a ZIPRA area and ZANLA wouldn't bother to go in there. But the bottom half of the country, Fort Victoria, the lower half of Matabeleland, the Midlands, the southern half of Midlands Province, this was a mish-mash and there were both ZIPRA and ZANLA operating and in some instances ZIPRA and ZANLA fighting each other which of course, we used to just stand back and do nothing about. So it would depend on the individual groups but there certainly was a territory objective of ZANLA trying to spread into what they would have regarded as Matabele territory and similarly ZIPRA trying to spread their wings into what was ZANLA territory. And that is where you'd get more instances of violence against the other tribe's people.

With the expansion of all aspects of the security forces by the end of the 70's, the auxiliary forces that were raised, it's been commented that they were not particularly well trained and they too in fact were responsible for excesses against the African communities?

It could be. I have no personal knowledge of that but as the war escalated and you needed more men, you recruited them quicker, the standards became lower and the training was obviously less. But you were recruiting them and training them for a lesser task; there was no need for guys who are just going to be on guard, either guarding a protected village or guarding a petrol site. There was no need to bring them up to the standard of a fully trained soldier nor was there a need to get anyone with advanced academic ability to do that sort of thing. We used loads of guys who in lesser roles that you would never think of putting into uniform, yes sure.

(00:22:02) **So by the end of the 1970's you've explained to me that you were the Commandant of the African police training school?**

I went there when I left the welfare job

So you were responsible then for helping to raise the Guard Force?

The training depot which was called Tomlinson depot which is where all the African police were trained: Tomlinson named after a former commissioner, where all the African police were trained also became the training place for the African members of the support unit which were a paramilitary unit within the police force. They were then moved out to Chikarubi to a training...they had a new training depot built out there for the support unit to get them away from the main training depot for ordinary policemen and this threw up for a short time some accommodation barracks. and we were asked by Internal Affairs if...they were about to start recruiting and training for their Guard Force and the first two or three intakes of Internal Affairs Guard Force were absorbed into the Tomlinson depot; but they were only blistered into us (?), they were there but they were trained by their own people but we saw them on the parade ground and all that sort of thing.

So you weren't involved in their training in any way?

We were actually not involved in their training. Their training was..., I knew the bloke so well but I forget his name but yes they had their own training staff. I think initially we helped with the training of their training staff.

So you weren't involved any further other than just an observer?

No, no and then after a while they...this was a temporary thing until they had somewhere where they could train and then they went away.

And you indicated your professional view of the Guard Force - did they serve a beneficial purpose or did they achieve what they were intending to do?

I think their main objective was to guard these protected villages and keeps, places like that. As far as I know they did it to an adequate standard but it was a difficult role in that these protected villages and keeps were subject to attack by terrorists and so they had a difficult role.

So you're implying they weren't trained in the duties that they were being required to perform? If they were being attacked, it wasn't just guarding?

Well I think they were guarding and protecting, but in the event of attack I think their responsibility was to call upon the...to notify the sub-JOC who would send someone to help

(00:26:05) Fred, in the first interview, one thing I didn't ask you was about Spirit Mediums. What was your view of the role of the Spirit Mediums in the war?

They had a great influence over the terrorist activities and also the African population. The majority of Africans are very, not frightened of Spirit Mediums but believe in them and...

To reverential...?

Yes but I think it goes beyond reverential. I think it's they actually believe that they have these magic powers and there were certainly instances of Spirit Mediums saying that "we've put a spell on you or on your unit and the army bullets will just go straight through you and won't hurt you", or "you won't be seen by them".

How do you know this?

These were reported back but they had a great influence over the terrorists and over the African population. The Spirit Medium is a see all: "if you don't do what we say, we will know". Whether they would know or not is neither here nor there. The fact is that they exercised this power that they were, not in control, but they...

They were omniscient?

Yes, they knew everything that was going on and they had a great influence. I mean this all goes back to the influence of witchcraft in tribal life and the greater the name of the Spirit Medium. The greater the power, the more respect, the more influence and without any shadow of a doubt I think both ZIPRA and ZANLA were...they would have their own Spirit Mediums but they were just as susceptible to their influence as far as I was aware. Certainly this sort of information did come back and the Spirit Mediums definitely were an influence.

Do you recall any debate among close circles of the European security forces on whether or not there should be an attempt to try and use the Spirit Mediums?

No, I was never privy to any suggestion of that nature

I'm just wondering if there was any, shall we say, current that you picked up on whether they were "fair play" for propagandists to...?

Not to my knowledge, no

Fred, by the end of the 1970's as Rhodesia went into the Muzorewa era and then with the return of the Governor as Christopher Soames and the 79/80 elections, what was your role in the elections after Lancaster House?

(00:30:40)

I was an Assistant Commissioner in Bulawayo and the ZIPRA, well the ZAPU because ZIPRA's the military wing of ZAPU. ZAPU were actively holding meetings, the leading light or one of the leading lights in Bulawayo was Canaan Banana and the political leaders would have to make application to the police to hold meetings saying where and when and that sort of thing so that we could ensure the meetings were conducted without any problems. In many cases they would leave the application too late and they would then come and make it in person and I had many face to face discussions or negotiations with people like Canaan Banana; but at that time we had a British Monitoring Force in existence and I had former Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Lock of the Metropolitan, well formerly of the...he had retired, just retired, formerly of the Metropolitan police as my shadow. Wherever I went, whatever I did he was there: you couldn't hope for a better bloke. At that same time going on was the movement of the surrender of the terrorists going into the...what do they call those places?

The assembly points

Assembly points and that was being supervised mainly by the military and they similarly had military monitoring forces looking after that. But we had three main police UK monitors in Matabeleland and we were, or one of my jobs was to ensure that those three guys got to see as much as what was going as possible so that they can make sure that...We wanted to make sure that they saw us being fair and I think, well as far as I was aware, that's how it went on. So at the time of those elections or the lead up to those elections that's what I was doing in Bulawayo, not very exciting.

Possibly not, but necessary from the point of view of coordination of oversight of the elections

Yes and I've always...

Because it must have been a very tense time?

Oh yes and I've always had an ear to technical matters and I did have my own tape recorders. I also made sure that I had one running silently in the background whenever Canaan Banana came calling.

Why?

Just in case that there was any suggestion that words were put into my mouth that never occurred

So that was your insurance policy?

My insurance policy

Did you have reason to be quite so cautious?

(00:35:22) I think so, yes

So you'd had an indication from other encounters that perhaps this would, in your view, be prudent?

That's right, yes. I certainly didn't trust Banana nor some of his other associates; I can't remember the names of them now but...

Trust them to do what?

To go away and convey the message that I had given to them or do what we had agreed upon. At that time an unscrupulous character, Canaan Banana.

And what about his colleagues then?

As I say I can't remember. He sticks in my mind but certainly he was the one that I was mainly concerned with. He was, at that time, the leading light for ZAPU in Bulawayo at that time which is where I was stationed.

I know of the sense of frustration among sections of the European community in the lead up to the elections with instances of violence and intimidation and the sense of shock at the outcome. Would you say that's fair comment at the news of the election of Robert Mugabe?

Oh undoubtedly. Absolutely. The white population, certainly a large proportion of the police had been almost promised that he would never get in but it was all cut and...

Promised by whom?

By those above us and by government, by the remnants of Ian Smith government, ministers, that Nkomo would sweep the board and it was not until, at the very last minute that the situation suddenly sort of...

So in other words, under the British then your intelligence role, the police intelligence role had been shut down? So how did you get information about how the election was likely to go or not?

I don't think the intelligence system had been shut down. I think it had just failed to communicate down to grass roots. I think at the top they knew but they didn't tell us.

As a way to manage the result then?

Yes

That's a conspiracy theory. It seems to me that Rhodesia was a society that functioned and thrived on rumour?

(00:38:25) No I don't think so. I think that if there had been a rumour of that then it might not have come as such a shock but that rumour certainly didn't percolate at all. It never manifested itself at all.

Mind, you were in Bulawayo so after all, in Matabeleland

Yes and I think the majority of the Matabele thought that everything was going their way but...

How tense was it immediately afterwards then in Matabeleland where you were?

Initially I think there was a general euphoria of "it's over" that "it's happened". I think the anti-feeling crept in much later. Initially it was going to be alright, everybody was going to be ok and then I think the Matabeles suddenly saw that things weren't going to be quite as good as they thought they were.

I was very struck by that book you lent me "Witchcraft and Murder in Zimbabwe" by Henry Clark because the picture that this policeman presents is really of huge social problems and discontents swirling about in the immediate aftermath of independence. Of people hoping for immediate reward, for employment, for land, the problem of how to deal with de-mobilising soldiers and there were a vast number on all three sides.

Yes there were expectations, obviously, that things were going to immediately change and in some aspects they did. I've said earlier on about applicants from black people to join as PO's. I mean, as soon as the Muzorewa government came in we were recruiting black patrol officers but the conditions had always been there that you needed five 'O' levels to apply to be a patrol officer; and so as soon as the Muzorewa government came in, black people with five 'O' levels applied and were accepted into the police force. In my opinion, too little, too late but that did change but free farms and big jobs didn't...

Didn't materialise?

Didn't materialise, no

Fred Punter, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to talk to me again

End of interview