

Brian Oliver

Brought up in Malaya and Scotland. Was at school in Scotland and then went to school in England from 1938, where he stayed until 1943. Joined the Army in around 1942. Left the Indian Army in 1947. Shortly afterwards, travelled out to Rhodesia to work as a clerk. Later worked in the Prime Minister's office (where he met Averil). Joined the BSAP Reserve in 1963 until 1972. Then moved to military intelligence work with the Army. Brian and Averil left Zimbabwe for the UK in 1982.

It's 9 May 2008, I'm Dr Sue Onslow, Research Fellow at the Department of History at the University of the West of England and I'm interviewing Mr Brian Oliver in North Cerney. Mr Oliver, thank you very much indeed for agreeing to be interviewed. I wonder if you could tell me, please, why did you decide to emigrate to Rhodesia?

Not much choice really. I came out of the Indian army in 1947 and there were very few jobs which attracted me in England at the time. People who'd been away who were older than me and had come out of the army earlier, or the forces earlier, they had gone back to their old jobs. Such new jobs as there were had been snapped up by others. Also I didn't like England very much: it was a miserable sort of place. Rationing was still on and the people just felt and were miserable. I'd enjoyed life in the army and as an Officer I'd enjoyed quite a lot of the perks which were available

So how long had you been in the army for?

Five years: two years in the ranks and three commissioned, so fairly early on after demobilisation I decided to go overseas. I was single then and I went round London, and tried all the Dominions houses. I wasn't interested in foreign countries - they're just a lot of foreigners anyway. I went round all the Dominions houses but none of them had anything to offer and I was waiting very despondently for my current girlfriend who worked at Charing Cross hospital waiting outside the hospital to meet her. I glanced along the road and there, 429 The Strand, was Rhodesia House. So I thought Rhodesia House, Rhodesia, where's Rhodesia? I thought back to my stamp collection, located Rhodesia, oh give it a try. So I went in there, "got any jobs?" "yes we have, fill in the forms" and I filled in the forms and in due course I got an offer to start off as a clerk in the Rhodesian government with passage paid out to Cape Town and rail journey up to Salisbury; if I resigned within three years I had to repay it that debt. That's how it all started so there was nothing conscious about it

So you didn't have any family links with Southern Rhodesia?

None at all

What did your family feel about you going and working...?

My family at that time were in Malaya. My Father was sent back to Malaya after being a prisoner of war with the Japanese. He'd been sent back there to start up telecommunications again. He'd been the director of telecommunications before the war, and my Mother went with him so there was no question of any corresponding with them really. I don't know even when I first told them about it but eventually they must have approved because when my Father retired, he retired to South Africa in order to be near me

(00:04:28) **So when did he do that?**

1949, Well, he was invalided out really

So at that point you didn't really have any family links with the UK if your family was in Malaya and with you in Rhodesia. Did you feel that you'd cut your ties with England, or was England still home?

No, England I suppose ... while I was in the army, yes, I looked on England as home during the war but I felt no great attachments to it. I'd been brought up in Malaya and in Scotland very largely; I hadn't spent all that much time in England come to think of it. 1938 to 1942, that was all

So schooling though, you'd gone to school in England?

From 1938, prior to that school in Scotland, so I had no particular feel for England.

But which public school did you go to?

Brentwood

To Brentwood?

Yes

Did that steer its pupils towards colonial service or working overseas?

It steered people towards service careers. We were encouraged to go, during the war of course, into the forces but even prior to the war people were encouraged to go into the church or one of the forces arms. We had a sprinkling of old boys who were ambassadors and consuls and one thing and the other in the diplomatic field, so there was a leaning towards that. My father had in fact booked me into the Oriental School of Languages but of course the way things turned out that didn't happen. It's just as well because I'm an awful linguist. I wouldn't have done very well

So you worked for the Rhodesian government from 1947, and when did you join the Prime Ministers office?

I went to the Prime Minister's office two weeks after UDI was declared in November 1965. I went there from our External Affairs ministry where I was in charge of the United Nations desk. The United Nations of course all disappeared, all the various bodies disappeared within a week; and I was sitting there twiddling my thumbs and told "Transfer to Prime Minister's office. There's somebody there we want to replace and see how you fit in with the job." And that's how it happened

What were your responsibilities in the Prime Minister's office when you first arrived?

(00:08:12) I was given cabinet committees to service. This was perhaps one of the reasons I'd been picked for this was because I'd done quite a good job, though I say it myself in Parliament, in the Rhodesian legislative assembly as a committee clerk to select committees. I had pretty good reports from them so it was mainly cabinet committee work, very little admin work. I'm trying to think, very little, oh I had various odd jobs like I was clerk of the Executive Council which is the equivalent of the Privy Council; I was clerk of that and so it was virtually all cabinet committee work

Do you remember which particular cabinet committees? Were there any that were particularly involved in Rhodesia's security situation?

Oh yes, right from the outset I was the secretary of the Prime Ministers Economic Council, PEC we called it and it met daily from the imposition of sanctions. It met daily to discuss all the ways and means of overcoming sanctions

So how much collaboration was there between the PEC and the Rhodesian business community? Was there a very tight link between the two?

Well, among the membership of the PEC were the minister and the secretary of the ministry of commerce and industry; and also the governor of the reserve bank was a member and the secretary to the treasury

Mines as well? Was the minister for mines also on that?

Subsequently, later on, yes. Not initially and then through them, through their own channels, they maintained contact with industry and commerce. Rhodesia was very small of course: it's only the size of, administratively it's only the size of a county of England and consequently contacts were pretty easy to maintain. There was a closeness that you don't get in England as a country. Everybody knew an MP for instance, does everybody in this country know an MP?

Well, I might do but...

Yes, but the average person doesn't. The MP's a very remote sort of person

Well, let alone an MEP. I doubt whether anyone would be able to name their MEP. So Brian, as a historian, what should I look at when we're talking about the Rhodesian security situation? It's not just after all the actual fighting. It's the whole question of the defence of the country?

Oh yes, absolutely. Virtually everything we did had an impact on the national security. Once the world made it clear that we were bad boys we were forced into a laager situation and the laager situation was very familiar to Rhodesians with their knowledge of South African history. And the way the Afrikaner trekkers formed themselves into laager when attacked. In fact since then it seemed (00:12:52) to me very obvious that even when places like Iraq get attacked by somebody like the Americans and they close ranks. It happens to everybody I think who's attacked from outside: they close ranks

So this sense then of a created laager mentality very much pre-dated the re-emergence of the insurgency in December 1972?

Yes

You're talking about a culture of security, a culture of an embattled community, is that fair?

Yes that's fair. Embattled is perhaps rather a strong word to use. We weren't exactly backs to the wall or anything like that. It was more of a lot of challenges, I think

How much could you travel? Could you travel outside Rhodesia?

Yes, but there were limitations imposed by the amount of foreign currency we could take, and when we went in 1970, 300 dollars each

So you travelled on your British passport?

Yes, that's right. During UDI we travelled on British passports but we still had our Rhodesian passports which we used for South Africa or Portugal or Mozambique, I should say

When were you drawn into the security forces proper, as it were? Into the military aspect of Rhodesian civil war?

Well, I joined the police reserve in 1963 as soon as I'd left parliament because while I was in parliament I wasn't allowed to be in the police reserve. But 1963 I joined the police reserve and I became a section leader for my area

So how big would that have been?

The area?

Yes

Huge, Borrowdale rural was about 100 square miles. No, it's only a suburb beyond Salisbury out towards Domboshawa which isn't shown on the map here, but it's north east of Salisbury and...

So what were your responsibilities in the police reserve?

Well, we didn't do sort of Bobby duties. We were essentially armed police who would perform or learnt skills relating to infantry work but also incorporating police discipline, police administration in the sense of how to arrest people, how to make arrests but always in a fighting situation (00:16:17)

So you had formal police training? Or you were trained by the military?

No, formal police training. That's from 1963 onwards because even at that point, I think it was recognised that one day there was going to be a showdown. So 1963 till 1972, I was in the police reserve; then 1972 I was invited to join the military intelligence

Your time in the police reserve, how onerous was that? Was this one weekend a month or...?

Oh no, we met every week. Most weekends we were active going around our area, familiarising ourselves with our area and with part of the African area, tribal trust land which was part of our area to look after, locating caves, locating all the sorts of places where terrorists could hide their arms and whatever

How big a group were you in this police, in your particular police section?

There were three section leaders and a unit leader and each section had about fifteen men

And the whole country was divided up into these sections to support the BSAP?

That's correct. These were rural reserve as opposed to town reserve. Town reservists did more police work but the rural police, they're the ones who developed into (PATU) eventually which you've probably come across?

Yes

And who were still under the BSAP but who were wholly military in character. So that's what we did

So from 1972 you joined military intelligence?

Yes that's right

Now that was separate from the Central Intelligence Organisation, Ken Flowers' organisation?

Yes but we worked closely with them. In fact, at the end of my time I was actually the RIC (Rhodesian Intelligence Corps) member stationed at CIO headquarters where I was concerned mainly with material which had been captured from the Terrs, either by means of raids into Mozambique or Zambia or whatever, when documents were sent back or stuff taken off bodies in the battlefield. I would be concerned with the military (00:19:52) matters contained in those documents and then when I'd dealt with them, they would go on to CIO for the political and other aspects

So what type of material were you discovering?

Largely training notes; the different training camps had different notes and things

Did they differ radically from those in Mozambique to those in Zambia and those who trained at Boma in Angola?

Yes, but I don't remember coming across much from Angola. I mean, there were men who'd been trained in Algeria, China, Russia - the ZIPRA people of course, the Russian influence; and the ZANLA people, the Chinese influence - Tanzania and other places and it was possible to tell from there, from the notes which...

Who their sponsors were?

Yes, that's right. Where they trained and so on, even although they didn't actually record it in the notes

So these were notes from political officers with the troops or...?

No, anybody straightforward Cadres and terrorists of all ranks. In fact I was eventually tasked to do an OrBat for ZANLA and ZIPRA: an order of battle which covers everything there, logistics and their intelligence and everything. I wrote a book on it which Averil typed under conditions of great secrecy; we'd only just finished it and the whole thing folded and the book went down to South Africa

Did it stay there?

In military intelligence, we heard subsequently that they'd been using it in Angola and Namibia. I don't think it was ever published

No, but obviously of extreme use to the South African counter intelligence people

Yes, I actually had an offer to join their side in the South African military intelligence with the rank of Major, but I turned it down

When was that, Brian? In 1980?

Yes, must have been during 80. So it must have been during 1980, yes

That's I know when the South Africans had a great push to recruit former Rhodesian security personnel

Yes a lot of chaps were taken out

End of tape

Part two: 9 May

Brian, you mentioned that you joined military intelligence in 1972, was that a voluntary switch from your duties in the Prime Ministers office or were you conscripted into military intelligence?

Oh no, this was only as a part time thing, territorial work. No I was still in the Prime Minister's office. No, no actually hold on: in 1972 I moved on to another ministry because I couldn't get any further promotion in the Prime Minister's office and I was about ready to go up to under secretary. So I went off to another ministry but that was just coincidental with the war which had started to hot up as you know in 1972. The 68 to 72 period was a bit of a phoney war, but in 72 it started to hot up. I was actually recruited by Gordon Merrington who was the officer in charge of Rhodesian, well it was still under the DMI the Directorate of Military Intelligence, the director at that time being David Heppenstall. But I didn't know David Heppenstall then. Then two years later we were formed into Rhodesian Intelligence Corps

So that's 1974 that would have been, RIC?

74, that's right 74/75 I've got a plaque there

Don't worry, we can check it later. So how long were you an auxiliary member then of military intelligence? How long did you stay in that particular role, you said you became RIC officer?

Right the way through. Yes well I started off as a sergeant and then got up to staff sergeant and then I was commissioned. For the first four years I was out in the field with African troops and European troops, various detachments at different times doing different roles, following up tracks of terrorists and visiting kraals and areas which had been infected by terrorists. Then I think somebody at headquarters decided I was a bit long in the tooth to be doing all this sort of thing, (although there were complaints from some of the Rhodesian African Rifle troops; they grumbled because I was going too fast for them!!) Anyway, it was decided then that I should become more desk bound and that's when I went to Selous Scouts at their headquarters at Nkomo barracks outside Salisbury

So you'd stopped showing up those younger men who weren't quite so fit, clearly? But what were you responsible for doing during your attachment to the Selous Scouts?

The main job that I did was to assist in the intelligence work which involved included interpretation of aerial photographs and so on, on the camp at Westlands Farm which was the subject of the Green Leader raid. We had a series of photographs which came in from day to day or week to week assessing what (00:04:42) changes were made, where weapons were being moved to, anti aircraft guns and so on. It was a very well established terrorist training ground; of course their justification afterwards for being bombed, they said oh this was the Rhodesians just killing refugees. They weren't refugees: the African soldier wherever possible cannot do without his women and there were plenty of women and children in there and some of them unfortunately were bombed, but it was a very definite terrorist camp being used for training. We had all sorts of photographs of men out in the drill squares and so on

Something I'm very struck by your comment of joining military intelligence but still with your civil service duties and your comment also about the very unfortunate loss of civilian life, it seems to me that from the early 1970's this became a total war?

It did, increasingly

It became a war that your civilian life and your military life - this was not just you of course - really overlapped each other. So did it become a militarised society that you were living in?

To some extent, I think, it did, particularly in the rural areas because it was the rural areas which were under attack and it became more and more common for people to sleep with weapons. Now I slept with a rifle by my side, a revolver under my pillow and anti grenade screens up on the windows and didn't think anything of it. Farmers and their wives were coming into town with arms and again no-one thought anything of it

It was commonplace?

It was commonplace, it was a way of life

But to an outsider, you could say that actually this was a very militarised way of living, even though it had become normal?

Yes, I suppose, some white kneed Brit coming in for the first time would so regard it but people adapt. They're adapting now, Averil's daughter is still in Harare and Averil rings her in a state of great anxiety "and how are things?" "Oh fine, getting on all right" and so on because she adapts

What's the analogy? A frog in a saucer of boiling water and if you heat it very, very, very slowly, the frog doesn't realise

Is that so? I hadn't heard that one

A rather grisly image but, I think in fact quite an apt one. You adapt to your surroundings that in fact with the benefit of looking from outside other people would be appalled, particularly what your daughter endures. Mr Oliver, may I ask what or whom did you think you were fighting for in the 1970's in Rhodesia?

(00:08:28) We were fighting, as we saw it, for the maintenance of Western standards in our country. Eventually we felt we were fighting for our very survival, but the driving force right from the beginning was we were fighting for the maintenance of civilised standards, as we saw them. I think we were all very much influenced by Cecil John Rhodes' dictum of civilisation. We regarded our way of life as being a civilised one; and that was the reason that so many people willingly volunteered for service and who, if they were called up, didn't object to it. Most people didn't

So those who say "oh the Rhodesians were merely fighting for a materialistic way of life that was better than the one they'd left behind in England" missed the point?

Oh they missed the point. We were fighting for a cause. The general atmosphere I would say - I'm looking at Averil now - was very much the same as it was in England during the war

(Averil – yes, I think it was)

Everybody was part of a cause

(Averil – everybody worked together)

And as in Rhodesia it all went flat after it finished, the mood changed completely once it became Zimbabwe. Everything went flat or our society felt flat

Mr Oliver, who did you think you were fighting against?

Communism, essentially communism. The people we were fighting against were being trained in communist countries, the notebooks were full of communist jargon, and particularly the political commissars books and such things as 'Down with capitalism. Down with America, and down with the West and up with Mao or up with Stalin'. But it was difficult to recall now the precise...

But full of rhetorical slogans, exhorting the people, for sacrifice and suffering and solidarity?

You've got it, you've got it. Yes, that's right

So you felt you were fighting an alien cause?

Yes

An externally sponsored cause? Not a parallel Rhodesian cause?

That's an interesting one. Initially, it was an external communist one but then gradually the strength of African nationalism began to creep in and ultimately we were fighting both external African nationalists and (00:12:56) the external communist presence. Bear in mind that parallel to all of this of course steps were being taken in Rhodesia to bring along Africans, to create a middle class of Africans, urban ones. The political activists of course were in the urban areas. Where we slipped up I think and I was urging it myself at the time, that we should talk more to the political activists who eventually emerged in the shape of Muzorewa and for a time with Sithole and his people. But we didn't talk to them enough. The Prime Minister was very influenced by the Secretary for Internal Affairs or successive secretaries for internal affairs. That was the old African affairs and they tended to be heavily reliant on the loyalty of the Chiefs and their minds, their mindset was that of the rural African being the true African and those that come into work in Salisbury they are becoming de-tribalised and therefore they're not important and that political activists among them were just trouble makers. Now that was the wrong way to look at it altogether like that. What small voice I had was to try and add it to more influential voices which were arguing for more dialogue with political activists in the urban areas, because that's where the roots of nationalism were really coming from.

End of tape

Part 3

Brian, something you raised in your last comments made me think: how far did you see the conflict in Rhodesia as a racial war in the 1970's? A war in fact between black and white?

It was inevitable we should see blacks if they were carrying AK's in their hands as being the enemy, but within Rhodesia particularly the imposition of sanctions, I think, brought, as I mentioned the laager mentality before, well that included Africans too. All the time that the war was going on there were more and more Africans being brought into industry and commerce and, you know, more responsible positions. A tremendous number of training schemes were going on in the evenings. I used to lecture at Polytechnic in industrial management and half of my classes were mixed classes. I had undergraduates from the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland as students in these classes and there was a whole government push to increase the abilities and the earning power of Africans generally, particularly in the rural areas. Of course, the success of this was shown by the fact that the terrorists used to mark out particularly for death agricultural demonstrators and anybody who had anything to do with improvement of agriculture. They tried to smash all that and they did it fairly successfully; so successfully in fact that we heard some years later when Zimbabwe had been on the go for about fifteen years or perhaps less, the Zimbabwe government tried to re-introduce

the agricultural practices which our government had started and developed and the African farmers wouldn't have it. They said "no you told us that this was all wrong"

'So you can't say it's right now'?

That's right (00:03:13)

Brian, your outlook as a British Citizen coming to Rhodesia in 1947, then as a civil servant, a bureaucrat: you commented that you were trying to encourage your superiors, the politicians to accelerate African integration and advancement, residential occupation of urban areas. Did you feel yourself to be relatively isolated? Were you unusual?

I was conscious I was in the minority. I never actually voted for the Rhodesia Front. Funnily enough, I even voted for old Garfield Todd once, but having said that I obviously didn't feel strongly enough about things to walk away from them

How much do you think the war helped you and others like you? How much did it forge a sense of Rhodesian identity? In other words, it was war that made you all pull together, that made you Rhodesians but that also undercut your willingness to oppose and to criticise?

I would say the imposition of sanctions and the general feeling that the world was against us, that in the first instance created a sense of Rhodesian nationality. Prior to November 1965, we were not exactly at loggerheads but there were clear distinctions. I mean, I was 'a rooineck', a redneck, from England and those from South Africa were 'boers'. They were somebody different and the local borns, the true Rhodesians who were very jealous of the name Rhodesian – "I'm a Rhodesian, but you're not because you're 'a rooineck'", that vanished after UDI and imperceptibly we all became Rhodesians. Then of course when the war itself hotted up by 1972, we were a Rhodesian community already and the war accentuated it

In what way?

Made us feel even more Rhodesian

Do you think actually the...?

To the extent that I still feel Rhodesian

But would you say that military training, the fact of fighting had anything to do with it as well? After all, you've commented before to me that a soldier is a civilian who's been broken, he's been re-educated?

Yes, that's the case in full time military training. In the Second World War, of course, we were all in it full time and we were civilians who were broken down and trained as soldiers. In the case of Rhodesia that would certainly apply

where they were regular troops, but a large part of the forces consisted of territorials and they weren't broken down so much. The discipline was not so rigid because I think it was recognised that we all wanted the same thing anyway. So I would say in answer to your question that the war simply reinforced, if you like, and strengthened the idea of us being a Rhodesian nation under attack from the rest of the world
(00:07:36)

If UDI, sanctions, and the war helped to forge a bond of unity within the Rhodesian white community and elements of the black community, was it also a class divided society in Rhodesia at that time?

What do you mean by class?

Questions of wealth, was there an urban/rural divide within the white community? I'm just wondering how stratified it was, or whether it was a relatively homogenous Rhodesian white community? Yes, the liberal element had been marginalised, the Rhodesian Front was a broad movement, but Rhodesians were pulling together. Can it also be said to be a stratified society?

Certainly not to the extent of England. The first day that I arrived in Rhodesia, I went for a haircut and I think it was the next day there was a ball in the Princes theatre as it then was in Salisbury. I went along to it in my patrols, my army dress uniform which I still had with me with a girl that I'd met, couldn't tell you who it was

So you'd forgotten about the girl at Charing Cross hospital?

Oh yes, forgotten all about her then! I noticed somebody in the dance get up and it was the man who'd cut my hair the day before and I realised straight away this is a very democratic society among the whites. It was only subsequently that blacks began to come into the same sort of social milieu, but among the whites I think, probably the best distinction was whether one lived south of the railway line. There were two or three suburbs which were south of the railway line largely occupied by the poorer class of white people and a lot of coloured people; and adjoining them were the African locations as they initially were townships. So if you were south of the railway line, you weren't quite as socially highly regarded as if you lived north of the railway line. North of the railway line covered a wide extent.

Was Bulawayo the same?

I don't know enough about Bulawayo to say. I was in my second spell, with the Prime Ministers office. I was stationed in Matabeleland with the Matabeleland cabinet council and worked in Bulawayo but I formed no social relationships there. I used to come back every weekend to Salisbury so I don't know much about Bulawayo

What did you think of the white immigrants like yourself coming into Rhodesia, before UDI and those after UDI? Were they welcome additions to building this country?

Welcome additions, yes. I think we all welcomed the growth of Rhodesia. I recognise now of course that to Africans this probably wasn't a good thing particularly as they took jobs, but on the other hand I also remember that there were many jobs which were white when I first went to Rhodesia in 1947 which (00:12:25) before long had become the preserve almost of Africans: drivers, particularly drivers and I was in Roads Department for seven years and in that time so many of our plant operators operating heavy expensive plant became Africans

What was your relationship, your contact with the black Rhodesian forces? Did you have black Rhodesians operating under you in any capacity?

Yes but intermittently and different units at different times. For instance, there was one big exercise that we went on members of my unit... I'm sorry, let me start at the beginning. We used to have what were known as 'frozen areas'. They were blocks on a map and the word would go out such and such a block identified by numbers with effect from so and so, was frozen and that meant that Selous Scouts or other elements of the forces were moving in there to conduct search operations for terrorists; and there would be curfew, nobody allowed to move at night. If anything moved after six o'clock or whatever it was, it would be shot. It was noticed by some of my colleagues that there were particular areas that never seemed to become frozen areas, and why would that be? Would that be because that's where the Terrs have a permanent headquarters? And there was one such area, where I was involved in. Anyway, around the perimeters of it you have stop groups and I was in command of one stop group. Now that consisted of about twenty Rhodesian African Rifles; I had half a dozen coloured drivers from the transport unit; I had about a dozen men from one of the Rhodesian regiments the territorial infantry, a number of police, police reservists and I was in charge of them and we covered a particular section of the boundary. Other troops went in where there were kopjes and caves and things, and the air force came over and a good old battle ensued. It was in fact a terrorist command area and there were nineteen terrorists killed. As soon as the action finished I shot off and handed over command of my mixed group to the next person, shot off to gather military intelligence. So I worked along with these chaps: they were all equal, they regarded themselves equal, the whites and the blacks, they regarded themselves as comrades in arms. Sorry, I've suddenly remembered on one of the patrols that I went out on with Rhodesian African Rifles one day, my teeth or something were hurting me and I pulled out my false teeth to see and clean bits away, put them back in and the African who was on my right I suddenly became conscious he was staring "what is that?" and he was tugging at his own teeth trying to pull them out. I said "these are special European teeth". But he was tugging away but there was a great deal of camaraderie. They're a cheerful bunch, they really are, they're lovely people and I personally got on very well with them. I think a lot depended on how

you viewed them; it was the same even with captured terrorists. The one and only incident of cruelty by Rhodesian soldiers that I ever saw and I didn't hear of others either was when there was a raid into Mozambique and a helicopter brought back - my son was on that raid, by the way - a helicopter brought back a terrorist who'd been found in the bush on the Portuguese side. He'd been found virtually unconscious, his shoulder had been eaten away by a hyena and he'd been left there to die by his comrades, but the helicopter picked him up and brought him back. We (00:19:13) were just on the border's edge on the Rhodesian side and the aircraft, the helicopter landed and this wounded terrorist was taken out. His shoulder was an awful mess; it really smelt. He'd obviously had it two or three days before

And gangrene had set in?

Gangrene yes. And a sergeant from one of the territorial units came up to where this chap was sitting like this and he said "come on, you bastard, speak, talk" and he had a cigarette in his hand and he shoved it into this chap's back. I saw what was happening and yelled at him. I very seldom lost my temper but I really lost my temper that time; and unfortunately I should have taken his name and reported him, but things were happening around and we were too busy. I told him "be off and get back to his unit and he'd got no right to interfere with the prisoners like this" and certainly not in that fashion so and then I felt very worry for the poor old terr

Well, he was a wounded combatant?

That's right, yes. Anyway another helicopter came and took him off back to Mount Darwin but I found out later he'd died just very shortly after that. And then I had another interesting episode during that time in the field where an action had taken place down in the Bulawayo area in Matabeleland where a group of terrorists had been in a little copse of trees, had been located by a gunship which had poured down fire at them. One of them had been a terr leader; his foot had been sliced off, but he very courageously kept his AK going. He actually brought down the gunship, the helicopter gunship and killed two of our chaps. But anyway he was captured of course and his name was Mabonzo. After treating his leg, he was taken up for interrogation to the Selous Scout base at Bindura which is north of Salisbury. One of our chaps, Major Eric Roper, who was a superb Shona speaker and I were sent off to interview this chap Mabonzo. The idea was that we interviewed him separately, Eric first in Shona which was transcribed and then me in English because he spoke excellent English as well. We were just extracting this story from him. Among his reminiscences was right at the beginning of 1972. When this 1972 thing was started, there was one area that was very suspicious and I had been sent in with a group of my colleagues. It was in the Shamva area where there was a mission there. The information we were getting was that the mission was involved somehow with terrorist presence and we went over this mission with a tooth comb and couldn't find anything, and that was the end of that story until we met Mabonzo. He confirmed indeed the terrorist presence there; he was the leader of them and I asked him "well, where did you stay?" "Well, it was quite simple" he said "I seduced one of the white

nurses at the mission and she kept me in a little shed that she had attached to her bungalow. I stayed in there during the day and I slept with her at night”

Well, it was total war

(00:25:00) It was total war. Anyway, we duly reported this back and learnt subsequently the lady concerned had been deported. But then this Mabonzo went on to tell us too about how he'd been in charge of the group which had killed one of our fellow officers, Captain Watson who in civilian life was an agricultural inspector and he went around checking on cattle in the African areas being dipped. Dipping was quite unpopular among them, but it had to be done because of the tick infestations

Well, anthrax too. Didn't you also have...?

Perhaps, I don't know what else. Ticks was the main thing. There may well have been other things I didn't really know about that. Anyway, his appearance or his visit had been announced in the area so that the Africans would bring their cattle along to the dipping area. Of course that's a magnet for the terrorists. Although poor old Watson had a bodyguard, they were not very vigilant and he was killed. Mabonzo was the man who did that. He was an interesting man and he was telling all this because Roper and I had received assurances that if he talked, he'd be spared execution. Then somewhere up the line - I don't know where or at what level either this assurance was broken or it had never been given to us properly in the first place - it was an assurance that had been given without somebody else's higher assent and poor old Mabonzo, he swung. I was just so upset about that

You'd given your word?

That's right, yes. I felt awful

Was that unusual, that captured terrorists who were interrogated and who were frank, were later executed?

No, most of them. I think he must have been executed because of the murder of Watson. No, most of them who talked freely like that they were recruited. They were invited to join the Selous Scouts or go to prison. Which of course you would do, wouldn't you?

What a choice. So what did most do? Do you know?

I think most of them accepted the offer of going to the Selous Scouts but they had to go through the same tough selection procedure that all the rest did, blacks and whites, which was a tremendous bond-making situation. If they weren't fit enough then they were just released back into the civilian community but an eye kept on them. But I never heard of any other one who was executed for his activities in that way

Within the security forces, was there a pecking order? Was the Selous Scouts considered the toughest, the most effective? Was there rivalry among regiments

They liked to think of themselves that way and of course the SAS thought they were even better. Theoretically the SAS were responsible for external (00:29:27) operations and Selous Scouts were responsible for internal operations. Their speciality of course was pseudo gangs which went out and if there was a ZANLA presence in the area they'd go out as a pseudo ZANLA gang and make contact with the proper ZANLA gang. A highly dangerous thing but they were very good at it: make contact with them and then will either shoot them up themselves, or draw them into an ambush for scout forces. The other speciality was, if there was there a ZANLA gang in the area, to go out as a ZIPRA gang

Oh, yes

And not shoot them up or anything but make life sufficiently unpleasant for them, so that word would get back that, you know, ZIPRAs are fighting us or the other way round. We'd send them out as a ZANLA gang into the ZIPRA area and the ZIPRAs would be saying that ZANLA is fighting us of course with the intention of dividing them, splitting them. So that's what the Selous Scouts did, what they specialised on. But the Scouts offended the SAS because Ron Reid Daly was dead keen on sending agents outside and people like Captain Schulenberg, who was a nutcase, did some wonderfully brilliant things. He really did

Like what?

In his case, he was dropped into Tanzania, taken over by Rhodesian air force planes, dropped there, he and one African member. They were like brothers both nutcases and they stayed there for about four weeks living off the land and spying out for obvious troop movements going on and blowing up bridges, blowing up railways all this kind of thing, eventually being evacuated back to Rhodesia. But that offended the SAS tremendously

Because that was their bailiwick?

Yes, that was their bailiwick. Anyway, those two, they reckoned that they were better than anybody. David Heppenstall will tell you that the backbone of the army was the Rhodesian African Rifles, and in many ways he's probably right too. Then there was the Rhodesian Light Infantry, the RLI and they thought they were the bee's knees; but every regiment does, as you say. Then the semi civilian, semi troopie people the Rhodesia Regiment 1RR, 2RR, 3RR and so on, I think they recognised that they themselves were at the bottom of the line

Oh dear, so if you were other ranks at that level, you really were...?

Averil's son, Michael, he was.. well, and my son too

(Averil – Michael was 2RR)

Yes, as Geoff was, my son

What about the Rhodesian Royal Air Force?

(00:33:34) Well, they were ‘the Bryl-cream boys’

Why were they called the Brylcream boys?

It was a hangover from the Second World War. We used to call them the Brylcream Boys then because they were very glamorous Spitfire pilots and all the rest of it. You’d see photos of hair brushed straight back and Brylcreamed and so on. They were the real glamour boys because they were able to fly a sortie and then come back to the safety and comfort of a billet as opposed to poor old troopies sweating it out in a slit trench in the ground or a sailor man sailing the seas

Now come on, Rhodesia didn’t have a navy? It’s landlocked!

We did have a navy

Did you now?

Yes, we did on Lake Kariba. My son in law was a member of it

How large was this navy?

About four vessels, and they patrolled up and down Lake Kariba to intercept canoes and other vessels coming over from the Zambian side. Shooting up any launches or anything on the Zambian side so they couldn’t be used for transporting terrorists, so we had a navy.

So four vessels: how many men would have been recruited into the Rhodesian Navy?

I don’t know. They were actually nominally under the police BSAP, came under them

So they were more of a coastguard?

Well, no, we had Stan Trethowan an ex-commander in the Royal Navy. He was the technical advisor, shall we say, and I believe he had them all doing what it is that sailors have to do. One of the vessels was the Armanell which was capable of six knots, I think it was

Brian, the different regiments, did they recruit from different specified areas of Rhodesia?

Yes 1RR was Bulawayo, 2RR was Salisbury area, 3RR was Gwelo area and 4RR Umtali and that sort of thing. But those were the territorial units

How about regular army though?

No, regular army were recruited from anywhere including from overseas. We had quite a substantial number of volunteers from other...
(00:36:44)

Oh, from Britain, from the United States?

That's right, Lord Salisbury's son was killed. He was actually attached to one of the units as a photographer. But he was killed

Portuguese, as well? Relics from the former Portuguese colonies?

I think probably in the Umtali area

(Averil – there was the odd Portuguese name that I came across)

But those were Rhodesian residents of Portuguese extraction

(Averil – I don't think there were many in...)

No, probably not many of them

So no former members of the French Foreign Legion?

We had Americans and that sort of thing

Any former members of the French Foreign Legion?

Jean Michel Caffin said he had been Foreign Legion

Was he now?

Yes

Now I ask this because in the South African archives I've come across a reference that there was six hundred members of the French Foreign Legion in Rhodesia in 1978/1979. Now I don't know whether that's hearsay, or indeed if there was any truth behind it?

No, I think that number's been greatly expanded in the telling. There were a few soldiers of fortune, most of them finished up in the Selous Scouts but they were madmen, most of them

Yes, they were the 'Mad Mike Hoare's' of this world

That's right, yes they were

Very much so. Just coming onto leaving Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, when did you come back to the UK and why?

I came back in '82. I had a heart attack in '81. I said I would tell you later on about Nkomo. He was my minister. As I say, I was appointed Registrar General and my minister was Joshua Nkomo. Well, he was great for making public (00:39:10) announcements without in fact any reference at all to officials. He had no concept of the role of the civil service in formulation of policy and so on. Anyway, he made a speech one day, Joshua Nkomo did, and he said "passports have been the preserve of all the whites in the past. From now on anybody can have a passport". And all of a sudden he made passports a status thing among Africans

So you were overwhelmed?

Queues for miles at our poor overloaded passport offices in Salisbury and Bulawayo and of course "Treasury, can we please have more staff?" – "No can't afford the money", and I hammered and hammered and eventually I was allowed to have more staff, but they had to be ex terrorists, had to be ex services which I didn't mind in the slightest. A number of them are very well educated men, you know, with degrees from overseas. But we'd already been told no further promotion for Europeans, so the Europeans that I had just gradually disappeared and took jobs in commerce and industry. I just had no-one left virtually except my own second in command; and I would go to work at eight in the morning, finish at five or six or whatever go home, have a meal, come back and then was the only time I could run training classes from ten at night until about two or three in the morning, training these new people how to do passports and trying to teach them the ethics, no taking of money "you're out" the moment that happens. Anyway, this finally took its toll on me and I had the heart attack. The heart attack wasn't bad but my sister was dying in the UK at the time and the bad angina which I was suffering in Rhodesia, in the new Zimbabwe as it was now, disappeared the moment I landed in England. I came over twice before she died, finally coming back here after having half a dozen angina attacks a day in Rhodesia: it's 4500 feet in Harare.

Ah, so it's altitude?

Altitude. So doctors said to me once I'd been boarded out, get out of Rhodesia, get down to sea level, so I had a look at South Africa. Averil and I discussed South Africa, but we didn't like the politics. We loved the country and we'd have loved to been able to stay there, but the politics at the time were still apartheid rule and we didn't agree with that. So I think very wisely we decided to come back here where there's a national health service and that sort of thing.

How did you find Britain? After all, you said goodbye to Britain in 1947 because you didn't like the country. How did you find it coming back?

Well, we'd been over several times both of us in the intervening years on holiday and to see parents and that sort of thing, so I suppose we'd been inoculated to a certain extent. But it didn't take us long to settle in

(Averil – I think I may have found it easier than you did because I've never lived anywhere else, and this was home to me really)

(00:43:53) Yes but no, I didn't find it difficult to settle in

Did you feel in any way that you were - and I don't mean to be rude when I suggest this - a relic of empire, coming back from Rhodesia? Rhodesia had so wished to be a Dominion and to acquire its independence?

And it was gone. No I was always very fatalistic about it and still am. That's the way the cookie crumbles, that's my philosophy. I remember because I left India just before India had its independence, and I remember then thinking well India's crumbled. I'm so sorry for my poor old sepoy, my troops, but c'est la vie; and it was much the same after Rhodesia crumbled

Your colleagues in Rhodesia, had many of them come from the Indian army too, that you recall?

There were a sprinkling of them, but we didn't get together at all. Perhaps others did, I don't know. I did form an old boys society for my school, an old boys society several years before UDI and we used to have annual dinners and get together and that sort of thing. We had on one occasion twenty four there, which was quite a lot, but as soon as we declared independence I had a very rude letter from the old boys' society in England saying "you're a lot of traitors. We're cutting you off."

So you were ostracised? You were black balled?

Yes, so I wrote back and said terminate my personal membership. That's what I think of you lot

Just finally, how much do you think the war in Rhodesia helped to sustain a very male dominated, chauvinistic society?

I think it did. I think Rhodesian and South African youth in particular - the men were always pretty chauvinistic. The immigrants from England tended to be much less chauvinistic and much more willing to value women and so on, but the war when it came, of course, made the men much more macho. The young men were a pretty chauvinistic lot and my own son still is. I think Mike is too really, Averil's son

Well, you described the getting together at the Braii where the men would all be in one corner talking and the women would tend to go off and talk among themselves. Or at the club?

At the club with the men at the bar talking to each other and the women just either sitting behind them or grouped on the other side of the room. Yes, I'd say that was a pretty fair description, much more chauvinistic than in England but having said that I've noticed the same trait among Australians and New Zealanders, well Australians in particular. I don't know whether it's something to do with the southern sun?

(00:48:16) I don't think you can blame it for that! Mr Oliver, have I left out any questions that you feel I should have asked, or is there anything more you'd like to add to what we've already discussed?

No, it's been interesting you've made me think and to try to remember just how we did feel at the time. When you speak to others of course you'll probably get very different outlooks particularly if you make them stick to what they were feeling like at the time. As I've said, I was perhaps rather more liberal than most of my colleagues but very loyal to the government, make no mistake about that. I was very loyal to Rhodesia. Rhodesia had given me a career, a family and a home and proof of that is that we still feel Rhodesian and so the RAA means a lot to us. The Troopie statue is going to be inaugurated at, at Hatfield later in the year

Yes, I saw on the website

Yes and Averil and I are determined to go to that. We feel strongly about that so although we're very grateful to England, being English and Welsh (but she can't help that she was born there, you know!) Otherwise thank you for being a sympathetic interviewer

Mr Oliver, thank you very much for talking to me

End of interview