



LEST WE FORGET



Military Contribution of Southern Rhodesia to the Empire

by Dr Stuart Blackie



Southern Rhodesia was a small colony but supplied more in terms of relative manpower than any other country to Britain's involvement in the Boer War, the two world wars and the insurgency in Malaya amongst other support.

Rhodesia was effectively a British peopled settlement which came into being through the British South Africa Company which

operated under a Charter from Queen Victoria over mineral rights, from the Limpopo to Lake Tanganyika. Cecil Rhodes used this document in 1890 to justify sending the pioneer column, a group of white settlers protected by well-armed British South Africa Police and guided by the scout and game hunter Frederick Courtney Selous, through Matabeleland and into Shona territory to establish Fort Salisbury which, of course, is now Harare.

The Rhodesia Regiment was created in 1899 as a mounted infantry formation, with many coming from the Southern Rhodesian Volunteers. The Regiment served in the Second Boer War and was disbanded in 1900.

World War I

Rhodesians were among the first to volunteer for service and many proceeded to Europe at their own expense to enlist. Over 6,000 white Rhodesians went to war in Europe, East Africa and German South West Africa. This represented two-thirds of all European men between the ages of 15 and 44 and a quarter of the

total white population of the country. The Rhodesians, because of their small absolute numbers, were dispersed on the Western Front amongst a number of British and South African units and a number found themselves deployed in various British Units on Gallipoli with the Australians further north along the peninsula.

Rhodesia served in eighty Imperial regiments ranging from the Black Watch (where all twelve who joined that unit were killed), to the Tank Corps, Royal Flying Corps and Royal Navy.

The Rhodesia Regiment was revived with the formation of the 1st Rhodesia Regiment in October 1914. It initially consisted of 20 officers and 500 soldiers. It was sent to the Cape where it took part in the South West Africa Campaign under General Louis Botha whilst a 2nd Rhodesia Regiment, formed in November, was sent to British East Africa. Though the 1st Regiment was

disbanded in July 1915, many of the men, including thirty African scouts, joined the 2nd Regiment.

In addition to those 2,000 men who joined the 1st and 2nd Rhodesia Regiments, the British South Africa Police, the Union of South Africa forces and the 400-man Rhodesian platoons of the 2nd



Southern Rhodesia in World War I – the original King's Royal Rifle Corps Rhodesian Platoon, pictured at Sheerness, England in November 1914

King's Royal Rifle Corps, some 2,800 men of African and mixed race, most of them in the Rhodesia Native Regiment, also went to war. 900 men were killed, of whom 732 were European. A total of 527 decorations, ranging from Britain's Victoria Cross to Russia's Order of St Vladimir and France's Croix de Guerre, were awarded to Rhodesians.

Rhodesia fought a protracted campaign against German East Africa forces led by the able General Major Paul von Lettow-



*Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck
(20 March 1870 – 9 March 1964),
nicknamed affectionately as the
Lion of Africa
(German: Löwe von Afrika)*

Vorbeck. The Rhodesia Regiment acquitted itself very well at Taveta, though, as with other white regiments from the Empire, malaria and dysentery accounted for a very high number of casualties. Due to these casualties and the lack of replacements from the home country, where 40% of the adult white male population was on active service, the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment returned home in April 1917 and disbanded in October. The majority of the Southern Rhodesia Volunteers were themselves disbanded in 1920 for reasons of cost, the last companies being disbanded in 1926.

Rhodesia did not introduce conscription during the war but was proud of their contribution to the final victory. In fact, Rhodesia's contribution to the Imperial war effort helped it to become regarded by Britain as being mature and deserving of responsible government. The territory, till now administered by the British South Africa Company, was made a self-governing colony, just short of full dominion status, by Whitehall in 1923.

The Defence Act of 1927 created a Permanent Force, (the Rhodesian Staff Corps) and a Territorial Force as well as national compulsory military training. With the Southern Rhodesia Volunteers disbanded in 1927, the Rhodesia Regiment was reformed as part of the nation's Territorial Force with Battalions formed in Salisbury and Bulawayo.

In 1929, King George V approved the transfer of the Colours of the 1st and 2nd Rhodesia Regiments of World War I, together

with the Great War Honours, to the Rhodesia Regiment. They were received into New Zealand via the UK over 2 years ago but, being almost 100 years old, they were found to be in a poor state. However, money was spent on their preservation and they are now safeguarded in the Rhodesia Regiment display in the 6th Battalion Hauraki Regimental Association's Garrison Club.



*Far left: 1st
Rhodesia
Regiment
Flag
Left: Rhodesia
Regiment
Blazer Badge*

World War II

In World War II, Rhodesia again enthusiastically stood behind the UK, symbolically declaring war on Germany in support of Britain before any other colony or dominion. Over 26,000 Southern Rhodesians served in the Second World War, making the colony once more the largest contributor of manpower, proportional to its white population, in all of the British Empire and Commonwealth.

As in World War I, Rhodesians were distributed in small groups throughout the British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Dedicated Rhodesian platoons again served in the King's Royal Rifle Corps, and the Rhodesian African Rifles, raised in 1940, were in many ways a resurrection of the Rhodesia Native Regiment.

At the start of the Second World War in 1939, conscription was introduced. The Regiment's members were absorbed into British and South African military units as it was feared the loss of the nation's manpower in one regiment would have disastrous effects

on the morale of the nation. Though individual soldiers went to various regiments, the two battalions remained behind for Home Service.

Rhodesians formed part of the British force that pushed the Italian forces all the way past Bengasi and were then themselves driven back by the German Afrika Korps and Italians.

Rhodesians also formed part of the force that initially lifted the siege of Tobruk, and were involved in the main Alamein battle in October-November 1942.



Following a successful foray behind enemy lines in the North African desert, members of the Long Range Desert Group pose for a photograph in March 1941

Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), originally called the Long Range Patrol (LRP), was founded in Egypt in June 1940 acted under the direction of General Wavell. It never numbered more than 350 men. Though the

majority of them were initially New Zealanders, they were soon joined by Southern Rhodesian and British volunteers.

The LRDG was formed specifically to carry out deep penetration and covert reconnaissance patrols, clandestinely monitoring traffic on the main road from Tripoli to Benghazi and providing intelligence information from behind Italian lines. Because the LRDG were experts in desert navigation, they were sometimes assigned to guide other units, including the Special Air Service across the desert.

During the Desert Campaign between December 1940 and April 1943, the vehicles of the LRDG operated constantly behind the Axis lines.

Possibly their most notable offensive action was during Operation Caravan, an attack on the town of Barce and its associated airfield, on the night of 13 September 1942.

With the surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943, the LRDG moved operations to the eastern Mediterranean, carrying out missions in the Greek islands, Italy and the Balkans.

After the end of the war in Europe, the leaders of the LRDG requested that the unit to be transferred to the Far East to conduct operations against Japanese forces. The request was declined and the LRDG was disbanded in August 1945.

However, the Rhodesian Africa Rifles which consisted of native troops officered by white Rhodesians fought in Burma.

Rhodesia Air Training Group

On the outbreak of war in September 1939, the Government of Southern Rhodesia made an offer to the British Air Ministry to run a flying school and train personnel to man three squadrons - 44, 237 and 266 (Rhodesia) Squadrons - because of the large number of Rhodesian airmen and crew in these units. 266



Squadron fought in the Battle of Britain. Initially they were equipped with Spitfires but they later switched to flying Typhoons.

The Rhodesian Air Training Group, operating from 1940 to 1945, was set up as part of the overall Commonwealth Air Training Plan involving Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Southern Rhodesia. The trainees came mainly from Great Britain but also from Australia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, USA, Yugoslavia, Greece, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Fiji and Malta. There were also pupils from the Royal Hellenic Air Force in training.

Rhodesia was the last of the Commonwealth countries to enter the Empire Air Training Scheme and the first to turn out fully qualified pilots. By August 1940, the schools could train up to 1,800 pilots, 240 observers and 340 gunners per year and overall trained over 7,600 pilots and 2,300 navigators between 1940 and 1945 (seven percent of the total).

Formed in 1935 under the name of the Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps Air Unit, it became the Southern Rhodesia Air Force in September 1939. The SRAF was absorbed into the RAF proper in April 1940 as No 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron RAF. This squadron,



Flight Lieutenant Ian D Smith circa 1943
(Prime Minister of Rhodesia 1964-1979)

initially equipped with Hawker Harts, participated in the East African Campaign against the Italians.

Rhodesians fought in many of the theatres of war. Notable among them was the future prime minister, Ian Smith who, after being shot down over Italy behind enemy lines, was able to avoid capture and return to Allied lines.

Rhodesian airmen suffered 20 percent fatalities, becoming emblematic of a "nation in arms"

ideal that peppered settler nationalism. The RAF remained until 1954, indirectly assisting Rhodesian aviation, and many airmen returned with young families as settlers. Rhodesian pilots earned the highest number of decorations and ace appellation of any group within the Empire. This resulted in the Royal Family paying an unusual state visit to the colony at the end of the war to thank the Rhodesian people.



The Royal Family in Southern Rhodesia, 1947

On 15 October 1954 the federal air arm was officially designated as the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF).

The booming Rhodesian economy allowed more money to be allocated for new aircraft, training and aerodrome facilities, and growing co-operation with the RAF in the 1950s saw the SRAF operating in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Kenya, Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Oman and South Yemen.

Post WWII

In 1947, as a result of its service in WWII, the Rhodesian Regiment was granted the title of Royal Rhodesia Regiment by King George VI, who became the regiment's first Colonel-in-Chief.

They were initially mobilised for the Korean War but were not actually sent. However, individual Rhodesians joined British units and served in Korea.

Malayan Emergency

The Malayan Emergency was a Maoist-type guerrilla war between the Federation of Malaya, a protectorate of Britain until August 1957 and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), the armed wing of the Malayan Communist Party which used and cached the arms that Britain had given them to resist the Japanese occupation.

The lot of the security forces was to play a constant game of hide-and-seek with the communists, indefinitely searching for and destroying any base camps and food caches that the MNLA set up.

In addition to British, Malayan and Commonwealth forces, Southern Rhodesia contributed two volunteer units to Malaya for two years, starting in March 1951 and were initially known as "The Far East Volunteer Group".

As the British 22nd Special Air Services Regiment already had two Squadrons in-situ, "A" and "B", the Southern Rhodesians became "C" Squadron, known more informally as the Rhodesian SAS. "C" Squadron, which was formed especially to serve in Malaya, was the first SAS unit from a British colony. It was led by the 24-year-old Temporary Captain Peter Walls who was promoted to major soon after his arrival.



Rhodesian SAS symbol

Following the departure of "C" Squadron, Southern Rhodesia was uninvolved in Malaya until early 1956, when the 1st Battalion, the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) were tasked to relieve the Northern Rhodesia Regiment (NRR) in Johore province.

The 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian African Rifles, in which black rank-and-filers and warrant officers were led by white officers, then served in Malaya from 1956 to 1958. They had the highest kill rate of any regiment during that time and won a number of Military Medals. The black Southern Rhodesian soldiers were reportedly naturals when it came to tracking; many of them came from rural backgrounds, and had acquired relevant instincts and skills while growing up.

The constant patrols gradually began to take their toll on the insurgents, and guerrillas began to give themselves up increasingly frequently. A contributing factor here was Britain's granting of independence to Malaya within the Commonwealth on 31 August 1957, which dented the motivation of many fighters.

Of the hundreds of Southern Rhodesians who served in Malaya, eight were killed.



Southern Rhodesia in World War II – Godfrey Huggins, the Prime Minister, proclaimed the war one of national survival for Southern Rhodesia

Tragedy

Believing full dominion status to be effectively symbolic and "there for the asking", the Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister, Godfrey Huggins, who was in office from 1933 to 1953, twice ignored British overtures hinting at dominionship, but instead pursued the creation of an initially semi-independent Federation with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, two colonies directly administered from London. He hoped that this might set in motion the creation of one united dominion in central Africa, emulating the Federation of Australia half a century before.

The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was set up in 1953 as an experiment as a democratic, multiracial alternative to apartheid South Africa. However, despite efforts to broker a consensus between black and white Rhodesians, it became clear by 1961 that the Federation was doomed.

In an era dominated by the Cold War with increasing communist influence and support in the African continent for black nationalists, and viewing the experience in recent events in the Congo, the Southern Rhodesian government was indignant when, amid decolonisation and the Wind of Change, less developed African colonies to the north without comparable experience of self-rule quickly advanced to independence during the early 1960s.

Indeed, following the dissolution of the Federation at the end of 1963, the British government granted independence to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi). However, Southern Rhodesians felt that they had earned the right to independence following four decades' self-government with their demonstrable history of loyalty, and that Britain was betraying them by withholding sovereignty until more progress was made towards multiracial democracy.

White settler opinion hardened and Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front government issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence on

11 November, 1965 and later declared the formation of a Republic in 1970.

The Royal Rhodesia Regiment's title reverted to the Rhodesia Regiment when Queen Elizabeth resigned her position as Colonel-in-Chief.

Several veterans of the Malayan conflict, Peter Walls and Ron Reid-Daly among them, both members of "C" Squadron, subsequently held key positions in the Rhodesian Security Forces during the Bush War of the 1970s. Walls became head of the Rhodesian Army in 1972, and retained this role for the rest of the Bush War. Reid-Daly, meanwhile, formed and commanded the Selous Scouts, a pseudo-guerrilla regiment from 1973 a concept that was influenced by similar operations conducted by Special Branch in Malaya. Both the Rhodesian African Rifles and the Rhodesian SAS endured following Malaya, and served in the Bush War.

From the mid-1970s, officers such as Walls attempted to impress upon their contemporaries the similarity between the Rhodesian situation and the one they had experienced in Malaya requiring operations to be coordinated nationally. As a result, a supreme body called Combined Operations was created in 1977 with General Walls as its head and included representatives from the Army, Air Force and Police.

Strange looking vehicles emerged. Relatively inexpensive modifications were made to military

Rhodesian Mine Protected Vehicle



vehicles that enabled personnel within them to survive even though the vehicle itself may have been destroyed if it drove over a landmine. Horses were re-introduced as they were not confined to roads and hence the danger to them from landmines was, to a large extent, eliminated.

Following the Lancaster House Conference and a brief episode of direct rule from London, Zimbabwe was born in 1980. Robert Mugabe, a member of the Shona tribe, was installed as Prime Minister and later became President. Events were set in motion which subsequently included massacres of the Matebele tribe, the perceived rival tribe to the Shona, by the North Korean 5th Brigade, widespread corruption and human rights violations.

Hyper-inflation is a term which poorly describes the consequences when personal savings are turned to dust. For instance, a donation of ZR\$300,000 made to a charitable organisation in 1980 and valued at around £300,000 would be only worth £3 in 2005. What had been a prosperous country was reduced to a failed state.

The strategic and commercial mineral assets of Zimbabwe, as in several other nearby African states, have been sold to the Chinese. What the long-term consequences of this will be to Western security only time will tell.

The Aftermath

After the Unilateral Declaration of Independence, Rhodesians were denied the opportunity, which they had done for many years, to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph and, even today, their presence has been vetoed by successive British governments. They have subsequently held a separate service on the north side of Westminster Abbey at the same time.



Rhodesian regimental colours
London, 9th November 2008

Though it was hoped that this would change as Zimbabwe is no longer a member of the Commonwealth, to date attempts to rectify this have proved unsuccessful.

In addition, it has become clear that the British Government handed over all responsibility for its war widow pensions to the new, independent governments. The Royal British Legion and other voluntary and government pension organisations do not give assistance to Rhodesian veterans or their widows.

Following a request for assistance, a typical reply received read, *"Her Majesty's Government has no standing in the matter, and I am informed that, consequently, there are no provisions in the United Kingdom War Pension legislation which would allow a payment to be made in respect to a serviceman enlisting in a force raised outside this country."*

Many of that generation, now elderly and few in number, find themselves trapped in poverty and have been abandoned in the eventide of their lives.

It should never have happened.

The tragedy is that a country which displayed such loyalty should have ended up being treated as a pariah. Political correctness and selective indignation by the commentariat, whereby the accusation of racism or a "hate crime", even in the absence of any evidence, shuts down any argument, has condemned a country to penury and reduced its inhabitants, with the exception of the ruling elite, to widespread starvation, particularly in the rural areas.

One day, the present regime will be replaced and Zimbabwe will require rebuilding. That is going to be hampered if teachers, doctors, engineers, entrepreneurs and other talented people and their families, vital to the health of a regenerating nation, have become dispersed and are now happily settled in first world cities.

Rhodesians Worldwide

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