

Rhodesia's Tragic Terrorist War

The End Is Near

by Al J. Venter



Rhodesian chopper capability is hard pressed by growing influx of terrorists. Recently Rhodesia received 12 Bell 250s which are now in service to supplement the 66 Alouette, one of which is pictured here.

The camp as it stands today lies barely 10 minutes' drive outside Karoi, a farming town 200 kilometers northwest of Salisbury on the main road to Kariba, a region that has seen a steady intensification of the guerrilla war that started in earnest six years ago last December.

The only difference between this installation and dozens of other military strongpoints in the Operational Area which now encompasses about 4/5 of Rhodesia was the flag. Hung from an improvised flagpole, it was stuck up among a cluster of mud huts that characterize so much of this country.

With black, red, green, and yellow colors, it symbolized "the flag of our liberation," as it was phrased by a man calling himself Comrade Misunga, the black AK-toting "Commander" of the region.

Six Rhodesian Light Infantry troops disembarked at Misunga's camp early one December morning last year; all were immediately apprehensive of the greeting that was first accorded to them. Their spokesman, a Welsh sergeant with four years' service in the RLI behind him, explained:

"Christ! It was like going into an enemy camp. Every one of the bastards — there

were about 80 of them — was armed with a commie weapon and each one of them was holding his piece at the ready. And these were supposed to be our allies now ..."

The sergeant and his five buddies were immediately surrounded by the black soldiers.

Neither side was overly friendly towards the other. After all, as he explained, until very recently they had been at each other's throats at every opportunity. He had lost friends to these people — "We call them Gooks as they did in Vietnam." Many of them had been trained in Russia, Cuba and elsewhere.

"Suddenly, a black man, with a smile about as broad as he was tall, pushed his way through the crowd. His right hand was extended in greeting. His left hand held a Kalashnikov AKM. He introduced himself as Comrade Misunga and was accompanied by one of two white Rhodesian officials responsible for the group's liaison with the interim government in the capital." The sergeant was later to observe that neither of the two white officials, who were dressed in khaki, carried anything heavier than a pistol strapped to their belts.

"Obviously, when this happened, things eased up a bit. We were soon chatting away and examining each other's guns and talking to those former Gooks who could speak English. Even met one who had taken part in an op against our Commando the previous month. We screwed them that time and he admitted it. Wiped the smile off his face for a while, it did," said the sergeant.

The role of the sergeant and his five "troopies" was to lead the combined force into an offensive in an area not far from where Communist-backed insurgents, a few months earlier, had downed an Air Rhodesia civilian airline with a Soviet-supplied SAM-7 missile.

How did these former insurgents perform in the field?

The NCO was guarded in his reply. "Not the best; not the worst. Let's just say average." He was clearly not the kind of man who held the black fighting man in any high esteem, but then, he spoke from experience.

"It was obvious from the start that they were nervous about the exploit which ultimately took us out for three days. We were due to leave the Gook base at 1800 hours. Every man jack of them was al-

ready sitting on the trucks two hours before that. They just waited, smoked and talked. Their nerves just didn't allow for too many jokes."

At one stage, said the RLI sergeant, one of Misunga's men accidentally discharged his gun. A volley of automatic fire rang out from one of the trucks; all weapons were suddenly levelled at the bush.

"No one was hurt," recounted the sergeant, "but they ripped into this man. His own people dragged him off the truck and set about pounding him with sticks, rifle butts, logs of wood. He would have been killed had one of the white overseers not come to his rescue. As it was, the man was seriously hurt and we had to leave him behind."

Though no longer a phenomenon in Rhodesia's continuing guerrilla struggle, the use of former terrorists in this war and the extent of their involvement are still heavily classified by the Salisbury regime. At the present time it is authoritatively believed that there are about 2,500 "reorientated" terrorists fighting for the interim government (countering an estimated 10,000 terrorists inside Rhodesia and another 25,000 in Zambia and Mozambique waiting to come in and join the war).

About 10 percent of the area formerly controlled by the externally based Patriotic Front is now "dominated" by these people in areas as diverse as Chipinga in the east, Centenary in the north and Chiredzi in the southeastern corner of the country near the South African border.

So commonplace is their activity that in the Chipinga region former Gooks are in sole control of the area; the only regular Rhodesian troops seen in the area are those on supply runs to "Auxiliary" bases and those Rhodesians who make up the local joint operations command (JOC). These former terrorists now receive all their rations, arms, and ammunition from the Salisbury government.

While the situation has had the effect of releasing much needed military manpower for other, more sensitive operational areas in other parts of the country, there has been considerable disquiet voiced about consorting with people who were once fervently dedicated to destroying Rhodesia by force of arms.

One of the RLI troopies with the sergeant at Karoi made the point: "They've turned once. How do we know they won't turn again when it suits them? Then they could be at our throats before we've realized what has happened."

Another observed even more potently: "When you start collaborating with the enemy you've lost the war. The Portuguese — at least in Africa — proved that one." In his view "the only honest Gook," as he phrased it, was "a dead one."

Rumblings of discontent about Rhodesian war policy and collaborating with

former terrorists is not only restricted to the occasional Rhodesian Light Infantry noncommissioned officer.

It extends all the way up the ranks and has become so much a matter for concern that the Rhodesian Army was recently forced to establish a special security unit to deal with dissenters. Known as the S.I.B. (Special Intelligence Branch), this element is answerable only to the prime minister and his top military commanders.

The kind of comment that would have interested the S.I.B. was heard several times around Johannesburg in December 1978 and was once voiced by a senior officer attached one of the elite Territorial Units.

He spoke to a colleague a few days before Christmas and said: "We've all but lost the war. The way things are going now the Terrs have beaten us at our own



Due to manpower shortage, more women are being utilized by Rhodesian security forces. This lady is off for a bit of country duty, with her FN.

game and anyone who thinks otherwise is living in Mickey Mouse Land; and that, in spite of martial law throughout three-quarters of the country."

Like most comments at any Christmas party these words were sincere, though not all that innocuous.

Only later in the evening when the mood mellowed, he said, almost philosophically: "S'pose the sooner I myself accept that fact, the better. No use butting my head against issues that were settled in Salisbury a year ago . . . one of the reasons I'm here now . . . bringing the family down next Easter. Definitely not later . . ."

A tinge of bitterness had earlier crept into the conversation, which was to be expected from someone who had given several good years of his life fighting for a cause he and many others like him ack-

nowledge is now little more than a rear-guard action.

This officer's views were shared by several other Rhodesian soldiers who spent Christmas in Johannesburg, including the Welsh sergeant attached to the RLI.

With rare exception the general consensus was that Rhodesia was coming apart at the seams: socially, politically, economically and militarily. It was like the end of an epoch which would become substantive when the word Rhodesia had been obliterated from the map of Africa and replaced by Zimbabwe, a bloody six-year epoch that had so far cost 13,000 lives, the majority of them black.

One may well ask why so many Rhodesians are staying on for the final crunch that could come in six months, or at the outset, by this time next year.

The replies were mixed and there was something almost reminiscent of the final days of American involvement in Southeast Asia in their retorts — the same sanguine homilies that perhaps everything was not yet lost.

Said one of the soldiers: "Maybe there will be a change at the top that will allow us to do what we have to — the ultimate solution."

Another commented: "Militarily we can handle the situation, of course. It's the bloody politicians who've let the country down."

A young soldier — he was barely 21 — was even more explicit: "Those — in Salisbury are licking black asses, so what do you expect? You don't win wars by playing footsie with the enemy." He stated that the pattern had been the same in recent months. Each time contacts with the enemy had produced good results there had been someone back at headquarters who had moved them to a different, softer area where the insurgent element had been more difficult to find, more difficult to kill. "Almost like there's someone protecting the Gooks back at base . . . none of us understand it!"

One theme through most of these discussions was consistent: Perhaps a miracle would still happen. Maybe the world would stand still a little — long enough for Rhodesia to catch its breath.

The reality of Rhodesia's exposed and beleaguered position has become a nightmare in the minds of even the most dogged advocates of the old tradition, the Rhodesia of yesterday, where the sun shone 11 months of the year and where the white man was king.

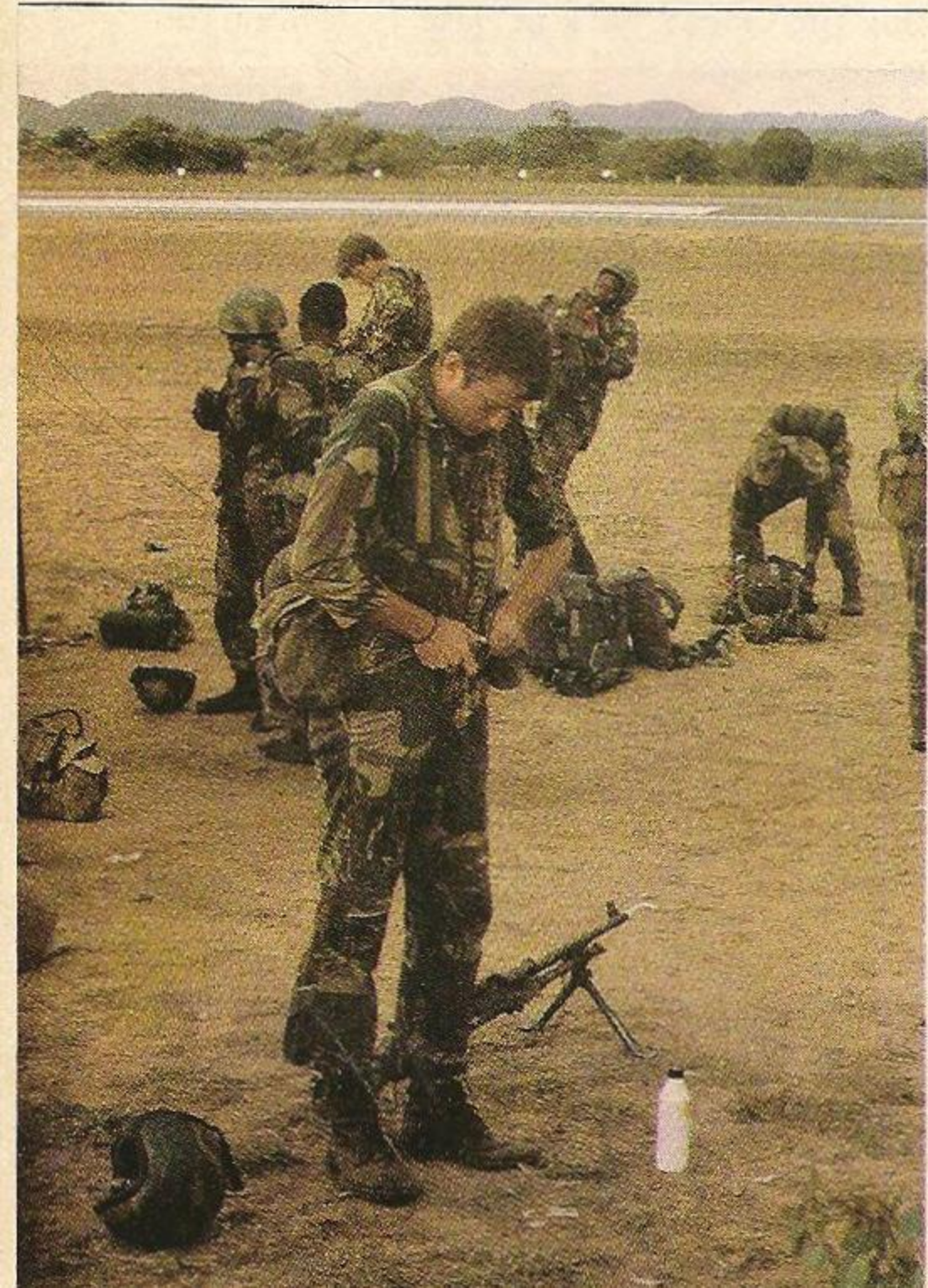
Now the war has come to stay, it's nationwide, affecting the lives of all. There is no-one in the country that has not suffered some form of personal loss — a member of the family; a close friend.

More ominous, it threatens in the immediate future to envelop the country in a bloodbath that will make the Angolan debacle look like some minor South



Para MAG gunner with 400 rounds prepares to "kit up." Machine gun is slung on para's shoulder and jumped just like a rifle!

Machine gun instruction at Rhodesian Regiment battle camp. M6 is 7.62 NATO MAG with old style fixed link belt. Troopie in background is carrying G3 in 7.62 NATO caliber.



American border fracas. For, while the terrorists receive the material and moral support of the major communist and Third World powers and some Western nations as well as the World Council of Churches, Ian Smith's only ally and friend is South Africa, and they're battling with steadily escalating security problems of their own.

Nor is the war any longer restricted to the bush. Terrorist commando attacks in and around Salisbury and Bulawayo — the country's two biggest cities — have become a feature of life to the average urban Rhodesian. So have the use of Soviet-supplied anti-aircraft missiles.

The civilian Viscount airliner destroyed by a terrorist gang near Kariba in 1978 was not the first time that these sophisticated devices have been used in the war. Nor the last.

Recent intelligence reports from neighboring Zambia and Botswana have indicated that other, even more versatile Russian war equipment will be deployed

with the insurgent forces in the immediate future, which is probably one of the reasons why several international airlines have lately become wary of overflying Botswana on their routes to and from Europe and America.

Another aspect of this war was the recent mortaring of Umtali, Rhodesia's easternmost city on the border with Marxist Mozambique.

For while this expansive garden city, fringed by some of the most beautiful mountains in Africa, has been bombarded by terrorists on several occasions during the past few years, this was the first time that the attackers were able to lay down their fire with pinpoint accuracy.

Shades, perhaps, of North Vietnamese and East German assistance that the Zimbabwe African People's Liberation Army (ZAPLA) has been receiving of late?

Yet a further indication of escalation in Rhodesia's war is that, while there were only two black battalions fighting under the banner of the Rhodesian African Rifles in 1977, the tally of these 1,000-man units will be increased 10-fold at present recruitment rates by the end of the year.



RLI Fire Force trooper kitted up and ready to board C-47 "Dakota." Paras sling rucksacks on leg straps and ride equipment to ground. No lowering lines used on combat assault!



"War on a shoe-string." Rhodesian army is using WW-II Bren gun carrier with four MAG 7.62 machine guns for bush convoy protection.

While tradition has always dictated that black soldiers serving in the Rhodesian Army were restricted to their own units, (the BSAP has operated in a paramilitary role on an integrated basis for the best part of a decade) more Africans are now being accepted into the formerly all-white Territorial units. And because whites continue to leave the country in droves, (20,000 last year, or 10 percent of the white population), blacks are being recruited into these back-up units, largely to keep their strengths on par.

The overall picture of Rhodesia's war is one of a grim, steadily escalating struggle that could, ultimately, threaten to overflow into other southern African re-

gions, including some of the black countries providing part of the succor, notably Zambia, where internal security is already a cause for concern in Western diplomatic circles.

Already pundits have noted that if SAM missiles could be used in Rhodesia, South Africa's busy airlines are only a single step away.

In this respect, the unequivocal warning has been given that both nations could retaliate immediately by downing Zambian or Mozambican civilian aircraft, since most of the communist war materiel designated for use by the insurgents is channelled through these two states.

Not all aspects of the war are negative. On the ground, Smith's forces do still

Mine detection vehicle called "Pookie" designed around Volkswagen parts.



It has been authoritatively estimated by observers in Salisbury that blacks now comprise about 80 percent of the country's security forces (including Army, British South African Police, Internal Affairs and Guard Force). The target, it has been stated by some military cognoscenti in Rhodesia, is to make the country's military forces 95 percent African by the end of 1979. For this reason, Rhodesia's continuing struggle is becoming an increasingly black-against-black conflict with many of the more brutal characteristics of an African internecine war to boot.

There have been other changes during the past year, a few of them positive.

While Rhodesia's security forces were officered entirely by whites in the past, the last months of 1978 saw the passing out of the first group of African officers. Several dozen more black candidate officers are at present undergoing training and will soon join their units in command capacities in the field.

have tenuous control over all the country's urban centers as well as most communication links — including major arterial roads and the strategic rail system that also links Zambia and Zaire with South African ports and industries. Most of the balance of the territory, in contrast, has been infiltrated by insurgents.

The basic, all-enveloping problem is that there are just not enough Rhodesians in uniform — whatever their color — to counter every aggressive action launched by armed opponents to the Salisbury regime.

The problem, essentially, is that, unlike South Africa, much of Rhodesia is uninhabited bush country and a fair proportion of the balance is designated for Tribal Trust purposes, which provide fertile breeding and recruiting grounds for the Patriotic Front insurgent armies of Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe.

The result is that Rhodesia's manpower resources are being stretched to capacity; some civil servants in Salisbury and Bulawayo claim that they are simultaneously holding down three people's jobs, apart from having still to spend periods in the bush on operations at regular intervals. Many Rhodesian whites are spending seven months of the year on active service apart from having to run their businesses back home.

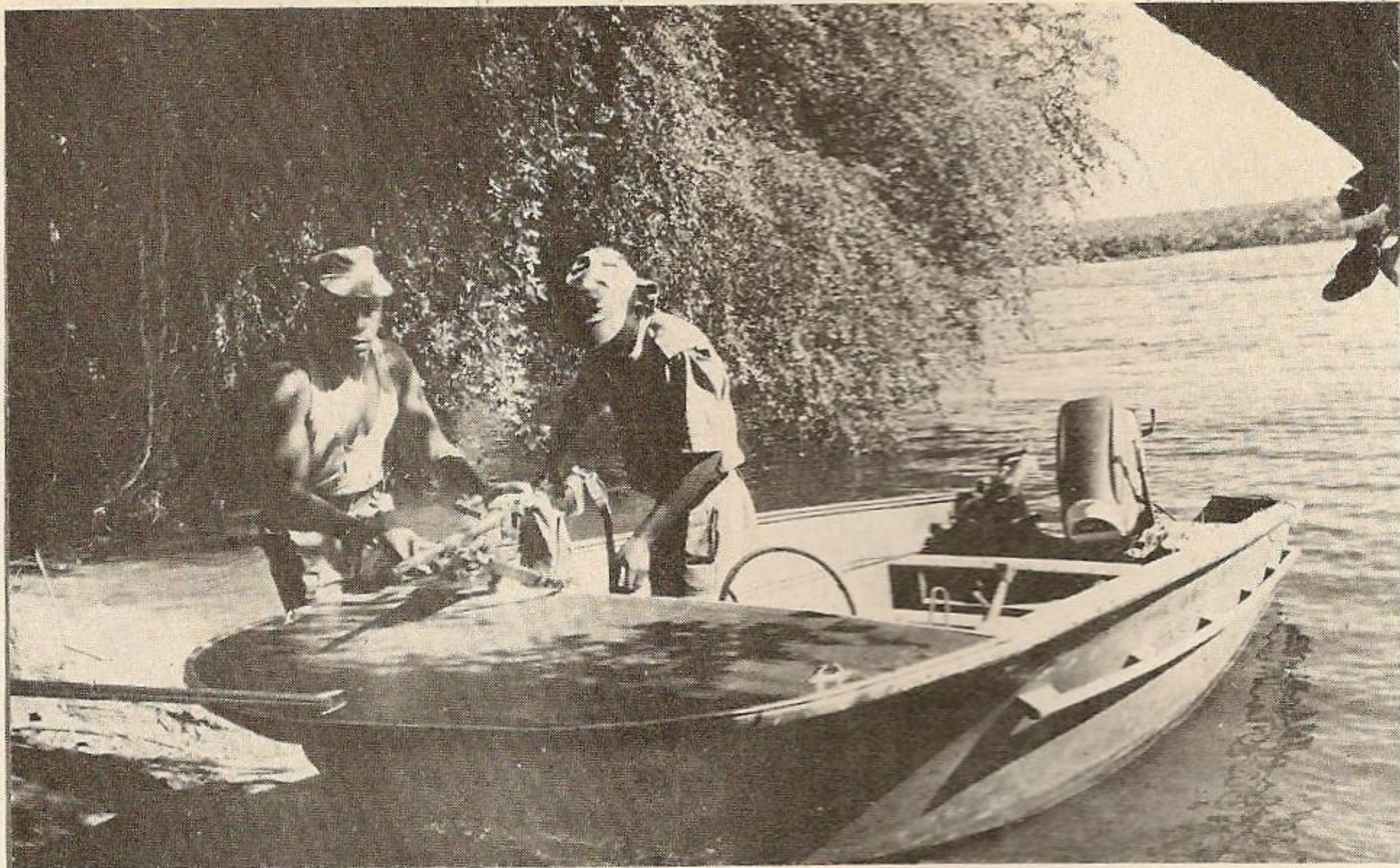
Issues are further complicated by the fact that an extended form of urban guerrilla warfare appears imminent. Already there have been bomb blasts in several Rhodesian cities and although the security forces have, until now, been able to eradicate most bands of urban infiltrators, it remains questionable whether the police and militia will be able to handle a full-scale urban guerrilla invasion.

What is significant about developments is that several insurgents killed in recent weeks have been found to have such unusual items such as Borrowdale race cards and Bulawayo bus tickets in their pockets, even though they were encountered in skirmishes that sometimes took place several hundred kilometers from these popular Rhodesian recreational centers.

One military commander was heard to comment: "It is quite obvious that the terrorists are now going to Salisbury for their routine R and Rs — the capital is more comfortable and more accessible than either Mozambique or Zambia."

Apparently, the insurgents discard their arms and uniforms and merge with the faceless black mass that provides much of the labor for the country's commerce and industry.

Countering this, it is known that several security elements within Salisbury, Umtali, and Bulawayo are now preparing sophisticated SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) teams to oppose the envisaged threat. There have been urgent requests for bullet-proof vests which are unob-



Troopers from Rhodesian African Rifles prepare to patrol Zambesi River. MAG light machine gun is mounted on bow.

tainable locally because of the UN arms embargo on Rhodesia and South Africa.

But even members of Rhodesia's provisional government are aware of the imminence of this new development. All three black members of Ian Smith's Advisory Council — Bishop Abel Muzorewa, the Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole and Chief Chirau — have insisted that the security guards placed outside their homes be white and not black. White reservist soldiers are now a permanent feature at the homes of several black Rhodesian leaders.

In a last-ditch bid to counter the acute manpower shortage, Rhodesia's military planners are once again accepting foreign entrants to their forces. For, while Rhodesia claims justifiably that it does not hire mercenaries, it has no objection to foreign nationals enlisting into the Rhodesian Army or Air Force, but at the same rates of pay and conditions as Rhodesian nationals.

Originally, the Rhodesian government paid the airfares of prospective entrants to its armed forces. Now it reimburses recruits after acceptance and an unbroken period of service of three months' active military service.

One result of this development is that Rhodesia was in recent years flooded by hundreds of American Vietnam veterans looking for their own version of military kicks. The majority found the routine too tough and conditions in the bush too rough to last more than a few months. The desertion rate among American citizens who have joined the Rhodesian Army over the past two years is estimated to run to about 80 percent, although there have been a handful of outstanding American field commanders who have contributed much to Rhodesia's war effort.

In contrast, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand volunteers have provided a

fairly good fighting record in Rhodesia. Desertion rates among these nationals — as with South Africans — have been insignificant.

There has even been a French voluntary unit attached to the Rhodesian Army, but its record was tarnished from the start.

At one stage, this unit was allowed to raise the Tricolor each day alongside the green and white Rhodesian flag. Unfortunately, the history of this 24-man detachment was short-lived; it barely survived its three-month training period. The unit was decimated in its first contact.

Caught in an ambush in the operational area in early 1978, the Frenchmen sought to fight it out rather than put their foot down on the accelerator, drive out of the fire zone, and then engage the enemy. A third of the unit was killed in the fire fight which followed — another four were seriously wounded. The unit has since been disbanded.

The incident highlights one other aspect of the war. While Rhodesian and South African volunteer casualties are religiously recorded in communiques issued daily by the army, there is often no mention made of foreign nationals killed in the war.

Another little-recorded aspect of the war is the fact that the specialist Rhodesian forces are increasingly engaged at hitting at the enemy well beyond the country's fragile borders. Raids made by members of the Rhodesian Light Infantry, the Rhodesian Special Air Services and Selous Scouts have taken Smith's forces several hundred kilometers into Mozambique and Zambia on occasion. The majority of targets "taken out" are Frelimo-protected convoys hauling insurgent war supplies to forward positions. There have also been the well publicized raids on terrorist training camps inside Zambia.

On one foray about which details were supplied to the writer, RLI troops penetrated 260 kilometers into Mozambique and knocked out several insurgent training and relay camps as well as several supply convoys. Soon afterwards a Special Air Service contingent paddled down the Zambezi in canoes and attacked fortifications around the giant Caborra Bassa hydro-electric scheme.

Most of these troops are then required to bring themselves out of enemy territory independently and on foot, which is one of the reasons why the average Rhodesian fighting man is today one of the fittest individuals alive; most prefer to walk to a destination with their packs, carrying weapons and kit on their backs, rather than enter an operational area on trucks — mines remain a serious problem in the continuing war.

Perhaps the most active of all Rhodesian units is the ultra-elite Rhodesian Light Infantry, composed largely of young men — the majority still in their teens — doing their 18-month national service stint. The RLI has been accorded one of the highest "kill" rates of any Rhodesian security force; at the same time, its forces take minimal casualties. This is one of the reasons, possibly, why the men attached to this crack unit are referred to by friend and adversary alike as "The Indomitables."

Divided into four commandos, numbers 1, 2, 3 and Support Commando, they are again subdivided (while on "ops") into mortar, reconnaissance, assault pioneers and anti-tank detachments. It is interesting that, although initially seriously affected by a United Nations arms embargo, some Rhodesian units are now almost entirely armed with communist military hardware — all of it captured while on operational forays into neighboring territories.

One RLI "troopie" disclosed that in his own sorties he prefers to use the Soviet

RPG-7 rocket to "take out" enemy vehicles. "It works like a charm — there is nothing in the Western armory to compare." Rhodesian forces are known to have enough anti-tank weapons to counter any conventional or unconventional invasion of their territory, Cubans included.

There is also truth in the report that they have a "fair supply" of SAM-7s for use: "should we need it," as was stated by a ranking officer while discussing the missile threat.

Most RLI operations are now parachute-orientated, with troops on standby enplaning into aged Dakota DC-3s (or Gooney Birds as they were known in Vietnam) the moment a contact has been made with the enemy. Others are ferried into the fire area by helicopters, using an excellently deployable fleet of not-so-young French-built Alouette helicopters, some of which — it is whispered in Salisbury — were bought not so long ago from an Arab power.

More recently, the Rhodesian Air Force was able to acquire more than a dozen Bell troop-ferrying helicopters from Israel, which have since been armed and armor-plated. These craft, used in recent onslaughts into Zambia, have resulted in a UN-sponsored inquiry on how Rhodesia was able to acquire the aircraft in the face of sanctions.

Over the years, airborne Rhodesian troops have evolved an entirely new battle program suited to conditions in the African bush. Most of these tactics are revolutionary in the conventional military sense. When contact is made, for instance, the men are required to jump with all their gear from heights of less than 100 meters, often into the line of insurgent fire.

Night jumps allow for an extra 30 meters — certainly the most hazardous aspect of this form of military operation.



Dead terr is brought to Joint Combined Operations Center for i.D. and final disposition.

On numerous occasions the men have been caught in crossfire while still descending. The highest number of bullet holes found in a parachute canopy so far is recorded as 28 — its wearer was only lightly wounded when a Zipra terrorist opened up on him with an RPD machine gun, ripping off two belts before he was silenced.

Already, members of the airborne Rhodesian Light Infantry have put claim to a number of world firsts:

They are the first operational group in any army to be allowed to jump into battle in shorts and sand shoes — it all makes for faster, lighter, and easier travel through some of the thickest bush country in Africa.

They also claim to be the first fighting group to jump into action carrying their own mortars and heavy machine guns and hold the current world record of RLI elements having made three fully operational jumps in a single 24-hour period, all of which included contact with the enemy and casualties on both sides.

The lowest recorded operational jump made by an RLI "troopie" to date is from a height of 66 meters.

As he explained it to me: "I have less than a second to make up my mind whether my 'chute is open or not. Longer than that and my reserve 'chute is useless!"

He was all of 19 years old, had been wounded twice, decorated once, and had already been operational with the RLI for 17 months when I spoke to him.

Rhodesian Infantry during search-and-destroy operation.

