

THE STRATEGIC UTILITY OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN YEMEN AND RHODESIA

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Special Operations Forces (SOF), or Special Forces, are military units specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct special operations.¹ Special Operations require unconventional tactics, techniques, and procedures. SOF personnel are specially selected and highly trained individuals, often equipped with the best military technology available to a country. Common SOF capabilities include but are not limited to special reconnaissance (SR), direct-action (DA), foreign internal defense (FID), unconventional warfare (UW), hostage-rescue (HR), counterterrorism (CT), counterproliferation (CP), and counterinsurgency (COIN). Because of the nature and rigors of their mission, SOF units tend to be small, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand personnel. Conversely, conventional forces are the ‘regular’ units in a military force. They are trained, equipped, and deployed to conduct large-scale operations.

Between the two, there exists a relationship of supporting and supported actors. Historically, and due to their specialized nature, SOF units tend to support conventional forces in operations. More recently, however, the scale has shifted in favor of SOF: conventional forces have increasingly become a supporting element for SOF in operations, with Operation Iraqi Freedom being the best example of this shift in roles.²

Special operations are an appealing option for policymakers because they defy conventional wisdom by utilizing a small force to defeat ones often much larger.³ The main reason for opting to use a SOF unit to conduct a mission is because of their low-cost, high-results nature. Policymakers and military leaders tend to employ SOF units

¹ In the global military dictionary, the terms Special Operations Forces and Special Forces are interchangeable. In the United States, however, Special Forces refers to a US Army unit (the famed Green Berets).

² The apportioning of ISR assets, which were highly desired by almost every unit, at the height of the counterinsurgency in favour of the numerous SOF Task Forces highlights this shift; Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike—The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 309-310.

³ William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Ballantine Books, Random House Publishing Group, 1996), 1.

because of their small to non-existent footprint, thus reducing the risk of domestic political setbacks if an operation does not go as planned or fails altogether.⁴ As US General Peter Schoomaker, former commander of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), puts it, SOF can offer “an array of expanded options, strategic economy of force, [and] ‘tailor to task’ capabilities.”⁵ SOF have also been utilized in a strategic attrition role, withering the opponent’s morale and numbers through repeated raids.⁶ In warfare, strategy is the means with which to achieve the designated political objectives. Wars are mostly lost or won on the strategic level.⁷

SOF units tend to be so effective because they manage to overwhelm an opponent by achieving relative superiority through concentrated surprise, speed, and violence of action at the enemy’s most vulnerable point. Swiss military theorist Antoine-Henri Jomini argued in favor of this “decisive point” approach. He asserted that a commander should always seek points where to concentrate superior forces and firepower and thus defeat an enemy that overall could be more powerful.⁸

SOF are designed to be effective on all three levels of warfare. On the tactical level, SOF can provide a commander with extraordinary choices to achieve mission success. For example, during Operation Anaconda in 2002, three Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) reconnaissance teams were able to call in numerous airstrikes against the al-Qaeda forces that were hammering the assaulting elements of the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain divisions. It was their specialized training and equipment that enabled the SOF teams to infiltrate the

⁴ Operation Gothic Serpent (aka the “Black Hawk Down” incident) in Somalia and the subsequent response of the Clinton Administration suggests that sometimes SOF, despite their smaller footprint, can be the cause of political backlash.

⁵ General William H. Peter Schoomaker, “Special Operations Forces: The Way Ahead,” *Defense Issues* 13 (1998): <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/1998/s19980201-schoomaker.html>, accessed March 10, 2018.

⁶ The Special Air Service (SAS) and Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) operations against Axis forces during the North Africa campaign are a prime example of this; James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

⁷ USAF College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research and Education (CADRE), “Three Levels of War,” *Air and Space Power Mentoring Guide* 1 (1997): p. 1. accessed March/April 2018, http://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/Volume_1/V1-D34-Levels-of-War.pdf.

⁸ Antoine Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 85-88.

mountains surrounding the Shahi-Kot valley, where the terrorist forces were situated, and wreak havoc upon the enemy.

On the operational level, SOF allow a commander to keep constant pressure on the enemy by assaulting his vulnerable points, thus making him commit forces for rear echelon security and having an adverse impact on his morale. For instance, during the North African campaign in the Second World War, the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) conducted numerous raids, ambushes, and reconnaissance operations deep behind enemy lines. They destroyed so many aircraft on the ground, that the Afrika Korps leadership was forced to relocate forces from the front to provide security. Their recon forays, moreover, prove crucial in breaching the Mareth Line, during the latter stages of the North African campaign. LRDG patrols were able to find passages on the southern tip of the Axis fortifications that could sustain large armored formations.⁹ Consequently, the Allied leadership utilized these paths to outflank the Axis fortifications.

Finally, on the strategic level, SOF provide policymakers an effective and timely option to exert national power around the world. For example, Operation Neptune Spear utilized Navy SEALs from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU) to eliminate Osama bin Laden and thus decapitate al-Qaeda's leadership.

In this paper, I argue that due to their specialized nature SOF are inherently strategic if appropriately employed. I define proper employment as the utilization of SOF in a manner that leverages their unique skillsets and accounts for their limitations. For example, a Navy SEAL platoon is uniquely qualified to conduct maritime-counterterrorism operations. But employing the same SEAL platoon in an airfield seizure would be counterproductive. SOF units' capabilities enable commanders to achieve results disproportionate to the force committed. Thus, faced with strategic decisions, commanders are more likely to assign vital missions to SOF units. I first examine the role of the British Special Air Service (SAS) in the Dhofari war (1965-1975). Thereafter, I examine the role of Rhodesian SOF (the Rhodesian Light Regiment, SAS, and Selous Scouts) in the Bush War (1964-1980). I conclude by juxtaposing the units' strategic effectiveness.

⁹Mike Morgan, *Sting of the Scorpion: The Inside Story of the Long Range Desert Group*. (London: The History Press Publishing, 2003), 175-180.

Oman

The Dhofar Rebellion (1963-1976), as the war in Oman is better known, was a Cold War conflict small in numbers but large in significance. A coalition of British, Pakistani, Indian, Jordanian, Iranian, and Baluchi troops served alongside the Omani Sultan's army. Their opponent was the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), a communist group, which received financial and military support from South Yemen, the Warsaw Pact, Iraq, China, and Egypt.¹⁰ In all, less than ten thousand coalition troops faced around three thousand communist insurgents.

Great Britain had been active in the region since the 17th century, mainly through the industrious traders of the East India Company. As elsewhere, soldiers followed traders: In 1798, the Sultan and the British government signed a treaty of friendship, which allowed for a longstanding British military presence. In the subsequent centuries, Britain's influence steadily increased through commercial deals and military assistance to the Sultan.¹¹

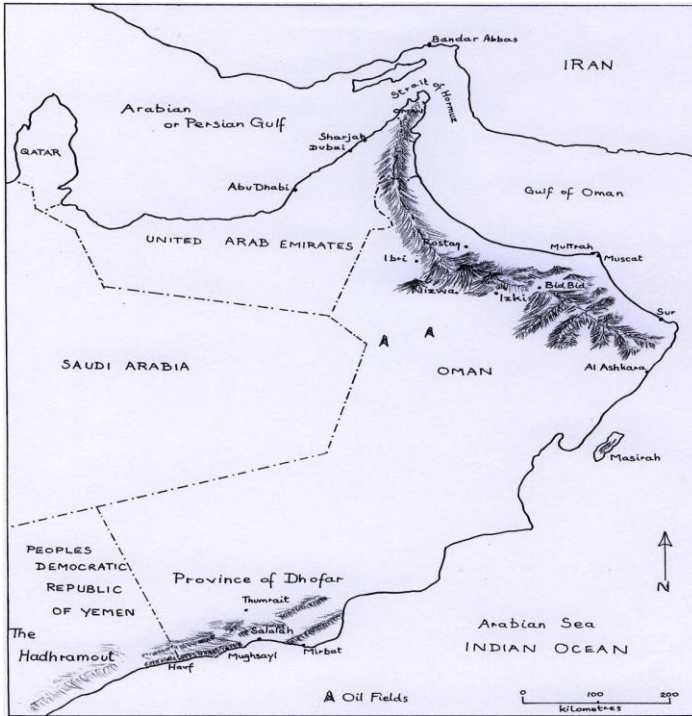
The British were involved in the conflict mainly because of Oman's economic and strategic importance to their and the West's interests. The Strait of Hormuz, which passes by the north Omani coast, was then—and still is—the world's most valuable oil sea lane and a strategic chokepoint. During the conflict, 56% of the European Economic Community's (the European Union's predecessor), 30% of US, and 90% of Japanese oil snaked through the Strait of Hormuz.¹² In an era wherein the Domino Theory prevailed, the reality of Oman succumbing to Communism alarmed many Western leaders.¹³ Oman had to remain free. And Great Britain would ensure it.

¹⁰ Ian Gardiner (retired Brigadier, RM) in discussion with the author, May-August 2017. According to Brigadier Ian Gardiner, they were evidence of Russian and Chinese advisors operating within Oman.

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel John McKeown, *Britain and Oman: The Dhofar War and Its Significance*, Master's thesis, (UK: Cambridge University, 1981), 10-11.

¹² Today, 25% of global supply sails through the Strait.

¹³ The Domino Theory held that if a country became Communist, it would quickly 'contaminate' its neighbors.

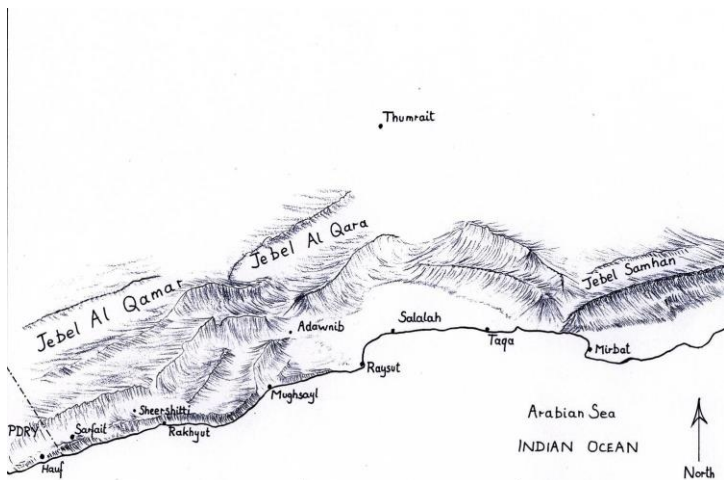


Hand drawn map of Oman; Dhofar lies in the South (Ian Gardiner).

Moreover, Oman was becoming a considerable oil exporter. In 1957, substantial oil sources had been discovered, and commercial exportation began in 1967. By the end of the conflict, 90% of Oman's GDP came from oil.¹⁴ However, British business interests in the Sultanate transcended the petroleum industry and included construction and development firms.

¹⁴ McKeown, *Britain and Oman: The Dhofar War and Its Significance*, 2.

Oman was divided in the northern part, which had the oil and most of the country's other resources, and the Southern province of Dhofar, which is a mountainous, humid country, with boiling temperatures and few water sources. A monsoon season (June-September) enveloped Dhofar in a mist "that was," according to veterans, "thick enough often to curtail flying and provide cover for the insurgents."¹⁵ Consequently, during the monsoon season ground and air operation were limited. The province itself is geographically divided into two parts: the coastal plains and the Jebel (mountains). An ideal place to begin a revolution.



Hand drawn map of Dhofar with prominent Jebel (Ian Gardiner).

But why a rebellion? Negligence and international developments. Throughout Oman's violent and fragmented history, Dhofaris had been treated as second-class citizens. Their villages and families had not seen any development for centuries. Their quality of living was medieval. The reason behind their historical negligence is mainly their ethnic difference from the rest of Omanis, who are mostly Arabs. And not even the common thread of Islam could unite them.¹⁶

Government negligence meant that Dhofaris revolted often. But it was the region's new international realities that turned this one into a rebellion and full-blown war. The People's Democratic Republic

¹⁵ Nick Knollys in discussion with the author, May-August 2017.

¹⁶ Dhofaris also use their own language instead of Arabic.

of Yemen (PDRY), Oman's southern neighbor, wished to share the merits of communism with its neighbor. In 1963, the PFLOAG sensed an opportunity to turn Dhofari discontent into a rebellion. By 1970, most of Dhofar was under communist control. The ageing Sultan, who had been conspicuous in his distaste for civic development, was ousted in a British sanctioned coup d'état by his modernizing son, Qaboos bin Said. Qaboos had been educated in Britain and embraced modernization and development.¹⁷

British military contribution was two-fold: (a) officers and enlisted personnel who were seconded to the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), providing leadership and technical expertise; (b) British troops, such as the SAS and RAF elements, which remained under British leadership. Additional military assistance came from Commonwealth ex-servicemen who, under lucrative contracts, served as mercenaries. Most of the fighting, however, was done by the Arab soldiers they led. The war was fought predominately in Dhofar.¹⁸ The Government's strategy was simple: Purge Dhofar from insurgents, hold the ground, and then develop it through civil projects. The Sultan and his British advisors understood that they could not defeat the insurgency without addressing the population's reasonable grievances. Adhering to proven counterinsurgency realities, they opted for a hearts-and-minds approach instead of a repressive campaign that focused on enemy killed.¹⁹

Operations

In the summer of 1970, the first SAS contingent arrived in Oman. For secrecy reasons, it numbered twenty men. Establishing a spartan base, they began developing their campaign. Masterminded by Major Tony Jeapes, the SAS came up with a four-pronged campaign that accounted for Dhofar's political (tribal system) and socioeconomic (livestock economy) realities: (a) start a hearts-and-minds campaign on the Jebel; (b) provide veterinary assistance to the villages; (c) provide medical assistance to the population through roving clinics; (d) gather and analyze intelligence to formulate a counter-intelligence strategy.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid, 21-29.

¹⁸ The SAS, however, undertook a very small amount of covert external operations inside the PDRY.

¹⁹ The US, who at the time was heavily engaged in Vietnam, mostly followed the latter approach, with the known results.

²⁰ Tony Jeapes, *SAS: Operation Oman* (London: Kimber, 1983), 25.

The SAS focused their efforts on the Jebel because it was Dhofar’—and the Insurgency’s— powerbase for it contained most of the villages. The terrain offered numerous challenges: waves of treacherous mountains, arid thorny scrub, deep wadis, which held the region’s water supply, and jungle—the incongruous result of the monsoon season.

To achieve their first three objectives, the SAS created four-man civil action teams (CATs). Each team had a leader, Arab speaker, medic, and signaler. Once a village had been cleared by the conventional forces, the CATs came in and established medical and veterinary clinics. The SAS’ medical training proved invaluable.²¹ They could treat anything from toothaches to gunshot wounds. To address the more serious cases, and to reach the more isolated villages, the SAS established a flying-doctor service. They also drilled new wells, which became vital given the Jebel’s scant water resources and the difficulty villagers had to reach them. By the end of the development phase, each village could boast its well, a hitherto unheard luxury. CAT teams handed authority to the newly established Dhofar Development Department at the earliest possibility. The SAS approach was so successful that the insurgents attempted—with varying results—to copy it on their controlled villages.²²

To achieve their fourth objective, the SAS established an intelligence cell, which included an information team specializing in psyops. The insurgency drew power and legitimacy from the Sultans’ perennial mismanagement and negligence of Dhofar. The lack of government information and literacy amongst the Dhofaris helped the insurgents. To counter that, the SAS cell started a newspaper—with more visual material to counter the high illiteracy. They also set up a radio station (Radio Dhofar) and distributed transistors to the villagers. Moreover, they placed news-boards, with announcements about the civil development program and useful information, in each village. “Islam is our way, freedom is our aim,” became the official logo of the campaign. Further, acting on the SAS’ advice, government officials established a livestock market in Dhofar’s plain. The result was the economic integration of the Jebelis and thus their further commitment to the government’s victory.²³

²¹ Conventional medical officers often deployed with CAT teams.

²² Jeapes, *SAS : Operation Oman*, 80-83.

²³ *Ibid*, 90-97.

Soon, the civil development initiatives bore fruits. An increasing number of insurgents deserted to the Sultan's forces, offering valuable intelligence on supply routes, caches, and enemy organization. The ever-resourceful SAS took advantage of the desertions to add another phase to their campaign: Enter the Firqats.

The Firqats (literary meaning company) were tribal paramilitary units formed from former insurgents. They were fierce but undisciplined fighters. The SAS established the British Army Training Teams (BATTs) to train, advise, and lead the deserters. Each BATT's size depended on the number of their fighters (it varied from six to twenty SAS troopers). The attached SAS troopers were responsible for everything from basic military discipline, payment and wellness, to fire support requests. Soon, great bonds developed between the SAS and their firqatmen, who refused to operate without their SAS advisors.



Firqatmen. Men carrying AK-74s from dead enemies (Nick Knollys).

The firqats acted as the eyes and ears of the conventional forces. Furthermore, and more importantly, the firqatmen were able to approach their fellow villagers and ensure that the Government's civil development initiatives reached them and addressed their needs. Indeed, no one could understand Dhofaris better than their own fathers, brothers, and sons.

The SAS developed the firqats in three phases. First, a BATT would gather deserters from the same tribe, elect a leader, issue

equipment, and then begin training. Second, the newly established firqat would return to its tribal area, accompanied by its SAS adviser, and clear it from insurgents. Finally, an SAS CAT team would arrive and commence civil development operations. The firqat would remain behind to police their tribal area and ensure that no enemy returned, a task for which they were uniquely suited given their previous experience with the insurgency.²⁴

A pattern soon emerged: each successful firqat operation would encourage further insurgent desertions, which in return produced more firqats. The SAS troopers treated deserters with tact and respect. They did not interrogate them but rather discussed with them, thus building rapport and gaining their trust. Only a highly trained and disciplined unit such as the SAS could achieve that.

The firqats' effectiveness to attract more deserters can be summed in the following incident described by Major General Arthur Denaro, who as a young SAS officer was part of a BATT:

"For two days I'd been lying in ambush with my soldiers. When the enemy, of whom we'd been told on good intelligence were coming, arrived. And they were just about to enter the killing zone of my machine guns when suddenly one of my young Arabs stood up. And the enemy run. Mildly irritated, I turned to this lad, and while shaking him up and down by the throat, I said, why did you do that? 'One of them was my brother,' he said. And the next day that whole enemy patrol surrendered."²⁵

When the war ended in 1976, twenty-one firqats numbering more than 1600 men were actively policing the Jebel. The firqats' importance in winning the campaign is evidenced in the praise of their fellow conventional warriors. Brigadier Ian Gardiner, who was seconded to a conventional SAF unit, said that "for all their limitations, I don't believe we could've won the war without the *firqats*."²⁶ And the firqats could not have happened without the expertise and patience of the SAS.

Meanwhile, the conventional SAF units focused on interdiction operations in an attempt to limit the movement of insurgents into Oman. Omani units manufactured two extensive defensive lines

²⁴ Jeapes, *SAS : Operation Oman*, 210.

²⁵ Oxford Union. *Red Poppy Debate*. (2015. Oxford), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ5jyQthUcA>

²⁶ Ian Gardiner (retired Brigadier, RM) in discussion with the author, May-August 2017.

(Leopard and Hornbeam lines), which run from the Saudi border to the north down to the coast to the south. For the most part crossing over mountainous terrain, the lines had multiple fortified positions as their strongpoints. Platoon to company size units were stationed there and conducted patrols in the Jebels surrounding the lines. Aside from limiting the infusion of insurgents and materiel inside Oman, the defensive lines were intended as a fixing point that would draw large insurgent groups that then could be destroyed by SAF's firepower superiority.²⁷

Although the defensive lines were not as effective as the BATT or firqat missions, they were significant in the overall campaign. The SAF leadership had grasped the importance of focusing on winning over the Dhofaris. The two defensive lines supported that strategy by denying the guerrillas materiel and manpower.

Conclusion

The Oman campaign is studied as a paragon response to an insurgency. There was a clear political objective: reconcile not punish the Dhofaris. And in true Clausewitzian fashion, the military strategy adhered to that. Indeed, every operation was centered around that goal.

Mao argued that an insurgency must first retreat and gather forces, then build infrastructure and population trust, and finally counterattack.²⁸ An astute counterinsurgency strategy, thus, would target the transition between these phases, thereby denying the guerrillas' goals. In a counterinsurgency environment, winning over the population is crucial. To achieve that, however, a force must be able to hold its ground. In-an-out operations achieve little more than temporarily frustrate the guerrilla—he can hide once government forces approach, only to return once they have left. That is why the SAS were crucial to the campaign's success, thereby proving their strategic utility, and consequently, the strategic utility of SOF.

Before the SAS CATs, government forces would storm the Jebel, clear a few villages, and then withdraw. They did not have the population's support to establish a permanent presence. The SAS, however, ensured a constant presence on the Jebel, secured the battlefield, and enabled civil development. Conventional forces could

²⁷ Brigadier Ian Gardiner, interview with the author.

²⁸ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*. (Illinois: Champaign, 2000), 3-11.

not achieve that given their lack of cultural and counterinsurgency expertise. Thus, the Dhofaris, who like all reasonable people waited to see which horse was going to win before they committed their support, were persuaded to back the government.

The SAS, moreover, built their strategy around the Dhofari culture. They utilized the tribal system, which emphasized democratic participation and meritocracy over pedigree, to raise and control the firqats. Such cultural sensitivity is difficult to find in a conventional force. In counterinsurgency operations, local training is vital since foreign assistance has an expiration date. That is the reason why the success of the firqat scheme was so important: it ensured the durability of the government's strategy.²⁹

The SAS also used Islam in their favor: Through psychological operations (the radio, newspaper, etc.), they targeted the Dhofaris' deep religious faith and branding the conflict as a 'Jihad' against the unholy Communist insurgency. The fact that the Insurgency advocated atheism helped them considerably.³⁰

In the end, the SAS proved a superb strategic tool for British policymakers. The geopolitical stakes were high. British and Western oil security and commercial interests depended on a communist-free Oman. The successive British governments, however, were constrained by military commitments in Northern Ireland and the Vietnam War's unpopularity. Thus, the SAS, with their counterinsurgency capabilities, small numbers, and covert nature were the only realistic choice for success.

The following brief Motion by the British Parliament serves as a lasting acknowledgement of the SAS' strategic utility during the Dhofari war:

“This House is greatly encouraged by the successful conclusion to the ten-year war in Oman. . . [and] records with pride the contribution made by hundreds of present and former members of the British armed forces, and pays special tribute to the work of the Special Air Service.”³¹

Rhodesia: Introduction

²⁹ Jeapes, *SAS: Operation Oman*, 110-121.

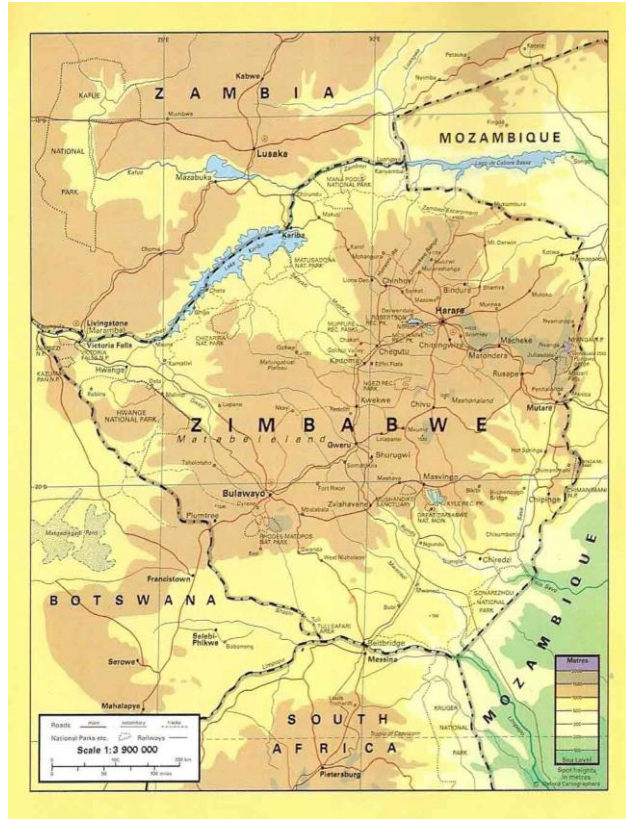
³⁰ *Ibid*, 123.

³¹ John Akehurst, *We Won a War: The Campaign in Oman 1965-1975* (Wilton: Michael Russell, 1984), i.

Rhodesia was a British self-governing colony founded in 1890 by Cecil Rhodes. Historically, a white minority dominated the political and socioeconomic landscape. During the decolonization phase of the 1950s-60s, London pressured majority (black) rule. In response, the Rhodesian government declared a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965. The international community condemned the UDI and imposed sanctions. Nevertheless, the UDI seemed an economic and political success. The Rhodesian economy grew, and white immigration increased. However, the Rhodesian government became complacent and did not foresee the need for a long-term political strategy. As a result, a Marxist, African nationalist insurgency began.

The Rhodesian Bush War (1964-1980) was a small but intense search-and-destroy Cold War conflict. Despite UN sanctions, the Rhodesian government received considerable overt and covert support. Israel and France provided helicopters and arms, and ironically—given the insurgency's Marxist credentials—Rhodesia traded more with the Eastern Bloc than with the West. South Africa was by far Rhodesia's most valuable ally. The Apartheid regime supplied its northern neighbor with invaluable economic and military support. On average, South Africa furnished 50% of the Rhodesian defense budget.

The insurgency was comprised of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), and its military wing the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), led by Joshua Nkomo and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), with its military wing the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), largely led by Robert Mugabe. Both parties waged their struggle from abroad (ZANU/ZANLA from Mozambique, ZAPU/ZIPRA from Zambia).



And although they later unified as the Patriotic Front (PF), they were bitter opponents. China, Cuba, and the Soviet Bloc provided them with financial, materiel, and training support.

Initially, the insurgency's strategy was based on the hope of British intervention. The guerrillas had focused on small incursions and urban warfare (bombing hotel, cafes, and universities). But they had enjoyed no local support; for instance, a major incursion in 1967 failed because locals informed the security forces. Once that British help became unlikely, the insurgency reorganized, shifted its approach, and transformed the war.³²

In the early 1970s, the ZANU/ZANLA leadership, influenced by their Chinese training and advisors, began a 'proper' Maoist

³² R. T. Wood, *Counter-strike from the Sky: The Rhodesian All-arms Fireforce in the War in the Bush 1974- 1980* (Johannesburg: 30° South Publishers, 2009), 35-39.

insurgency by incorporating the first two stages of revolutionary warfare: (a) withdraw and gather forces; (b) build infrastructure and population trust. Hitherto, the insurgents had focused only on the third stage (counterattack). Insurgents used local grievances to bolster their support among the Black Rhodesians. Their strategy, moreover, became more sophisticated as they targeted Rhodesia's socio-economic fibre with numerous geographically spread incursions, forcing the government to call territorials.³³

The Government responded by flocking rural Black Rhodesians to protected villages (fenced camps), a scheme inspired by the Malayan Emergency. It also erected a mined barrier alongside the Zambian and Mozambique borders to limit incursions (by 1980, it had claimed some 8,000 insurgent lives). The Rhodesian war effort, however, increasingly relied on SOF, which were so successful that by 1974 there were just sixty insurgents within Rhodesia.³⁴

The fall of the Portuguese junta in 1974 robbed Rhodesia of a valuable ally and turned Mozambique into an insurgency hub. The endless miles of the Mozambican border stretched the small Rhodesian forces to their limits (they had to secure Zambian and Botswanan borders as well). Portugal's flight also meant that Rhodesian SOF became increasingly important in the war effort as they were uniquely qualified to attack the insurgency in its new overseas haven. In 1975, a ceasefire and negotiations came to nothing. Thereafter and till the war's end in 1980, the operational tempo intensified. Reservists were summoned more often and for longer periods, and the economy stagnated.

But the beginning of the end for the Rhodesian government came in 1976. Following a special operation inside Mozambique (Operation Eland) which killed over 1,000 insurgents, South African Prime Minister B. J. Vorster cut oil, ammunition, and financial aid. More crucially, however, he publicly called for majority rule.

Prime Minister Ian Smith conceded and announced majority rule within two years. His bitter words describe the Rhodesian dependence on its 'ally': "In the end it was Vorster who we had to accept. If it had been Kissinger, I could have said 'Hop off!' If it had been the British I could have said the same. There was only one person in the world to whom I could not say that and that was Vorster." South

³³ *Ibid*, 35-39.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 35-39.

African politicians foresaw that international pressure would bend Rhodesian intransigence, and a black government would emerge (this did not, of course, mean that they wanted Mugabe or Nkomo).³⁵

In 1979, following a fully democratic election, from which the PF abstained, Bishop Abel Muzorewa became Rhodesia's first black Prime Minister. Nonetheless, Great Britain did not recognize his government and the UN called the election void. British diplomacy held that only a solution with Mugabe would be final—a belief centered on Mugabe's significant power on both national and international levels. (Interestingly, Margaret Thatcher had not only committed to acknowledging the result but also had branded the PF as a terrorist organization.) In 1980, an election brimming with irregularities and terror elected Robert Mugabe.³⁶

The Rhodesian Bush War presents a paradoxical case: despite the government's military victory, it lost the war. Why? Because a clear political strategy did not exist. Nonetheless, the military leadership had recognized that only a political solution could offer a lasting victory. As Army Chief General Walls said "we had always hoped [for a] non-racial, multi-interested, anti-Marxist" political solution.³⁷ The military, thus, constantly sought to buy time until the politicians accepted reality. And its strategy was centered around the most unlikely of forces: SOF.

SOF

I consider SOF the SAS, Selous Scouts, and Rhodesian Light Infantry. Among others, their capabilities included raids, reconnaissance, sabotage, combat tracking, communications interception, leadership elimination, abductions, unconventional warfare, and pseudo-operations. They were Rhodesia's tip of the spear. And although they began the war supporting conventional forces, they soon became the supported force.

SOF units attracted most of the 1,400-2,000 foreign volunteers, who came from all over the world, chiefly for ideological reasons. They conducted internal and external operations: Internals focused on border-control, counterinsurgency, and Fireforce missions; externals

³⁵ Ibid,40-43.

³⁶ Ibid, 40-43.

³⁷ Segal, Allan Segal and Brian Lapping. *End of Empire*. DVD. (1985. London: Granada Television).

focused mainly on raids, reconnaissance, and sabotage. Rhodesian SOF also conducted unconventional warfare (UW) in Mozambique. SAS troopers raised, trained, advised, and equipped the RENAMO, an anti-Marxist group, to fight against the Mozambique government, which harbored and supported the ZANU/ZANLA.

RLI

The Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) was an all-white unit formed in 1961. In 1964, it was renamed to 3 Commando, The Rhodesian Light Infantry. It was an airborne commando unit that specialized in direct-action missions. The RLI was the key cog behind the Fireforce's ludicrous lethality (estimates put RLI's body count to 12,000 insurgents, thus earning the unit the title of the ultimate "Killing-Machine").³⁸

The RLI was comprised of an HQ and four Commandos of around 100 men each. Most troopers were Rhodesian regular and territorial soldiers, but there were also many foreign volunteers. During the hectic closing stages of the war, the same RLI troopers would sometimes conduct three combat parachute jumps in a day; an RLI trooper holds the world record for most operational jumps (73).³⁹

SAS

The Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS) was an all-white unit formed in the early 1950s as the 'C' Squadron of the British SAS. They fought in the Malayan Emergency and later reformed as the 1 Rhodesian Special Air Service (1RSAS). Their mission capabilities included reconnaissance, direct-action, sabotage, unconventional warfare, and combat tracking. They were proficient in many infiltration methods to include Freefall Parachuting and waterborne insertion (utilizing kayaks). Alongside with the Selous Scouts, they conducted most of the external operations. During war's initial stages, the SAS did border control and combat tracking missions. But as the war intensified, they reverted to their raid and reconnaissance specialties. The unit had less than 250 troopers. Hopefuls had to pass a legendarily difficult selection course. As part of the cooperation between Rhodesia and South Africa, a covert South African Squadron (D) was attached to

³⁸ Chris Cocks, *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Roodepoort, South Africa: Covos-Day, 2000). p. 1.

³⁹ Ron Reid-Daly, *Pamwe Chete: The Legend of the Selous Scouts* (South Africa: Covos-Day, 1999), 173.

the SAS to gain combat experience and to assist operations. Despite their high operational tempo, the SAS lost just 38 troopers.⁴⁰

Selous Scouts

The Selous Scouts were a multiracial unit formed in 1973 to clandestinely eliminate insurgents in and outside Rhodesia through pseudo-operations. In pseudo-operations a force copies the guerrilla, infiltrates the civilian communities or operational areas, and obtains intelligence that enable the elimination of actual guerrillas.⁴¹ The unit's intelligence-gathering capabilities proved crucial to the Fireforce's successes. Indeed, at the war's end, the Scouts were credited with 68% of enemy casualties, losing only between 30-35 Scouts.⁴² Scouts' pseudo-teams also frustrated the Insurgency's political infrastructure, sowing confusion among its ranks. Their methods were so effective that South Africa begged for operational information (which it received in exchange for large quantities of materiel).⁴³

Initially, only a few hundred strong, the unit quickly swelled to 1,000 men. As with the SAS, a rigorous selection provided the right soldier. Lt. Col. Ron Reid-Daly (who had served with SAS in Malaya) was responsible for the unit's military activities and Police Superintendent M. J. P. 'Mac' McGuinness for intelligence aspect.⁴⁴

Once a guerrilla had been captured, a Special Branch officer would debrief him and analyze his intelligence. Then, the leadership would decide whether to 'turn' him (incorporating him into the unit) or not. "Tamed terrs," as they were called, served alongside regular Scouts and received bounty pay for kills and captures.⁴⁵ The operators' combat-tracking expertise coupled with the turned terrorists' knowledge made the Selous Scouts the ultimate Bush masters. At

⁴⁰ Charles D. Melson, "Top Secret War: Rhodesian Special Operations," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16, no. 1 (2005): p. 75. doi:10.1080/0959231042000322567.

⁴¹ Paul Melshen, *Pseudo Operations: The Use by British and American Armed Forces of Deception in Counter-insurgencies 1945-1973* (University of Cambridge, 1995), ii-iii.

⁴² Reid-Daly, p.13; Charles D. Melson, "Top Secret War: Rhodesian Special Operations," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 16, no. 1 (2005): 75. doi:10.1080/0959231042000322567.

⁴³ Reid-Daly, 474.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 36-37.

⁴⁵ Paul L. Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War: A Military History* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 106.

some stage, the unit even experimented with limited biological warfare.⁴⁶

Operations: Fireforce

In 1974, Rhodesians introduced the Fireforce concept: an airborne rapid-reaction force that intercepted, trapped, and destroyed insurgent parties within Rhodesia. Both SOF and conventional units conducted Fireforce missions, but it became an RLI specialty. South African helicopters and crew were seconded to the Rhodesian Air Force and enabled the successful Fireforce missions (with South African support, Rhodesians could deploy fifty helicopters).

The average Fireforce was divided into air and ground elements: the ground element had a headquarters troop and four troops of twenty-eight men each. Each troop was further divided into seven four-man sticks. Their speed and mobility were remarkable: Helicopters could be screaming towards contact just eight minutes after getting the “call.”⁴⁷

This is what a typical Fireforce contact looked like: A reconnaissance team (usually SAS troopers or Selous Scouts) spots a guerrilla party. They map out the possible venues of retreat and call a Fireforce. The ‘First Wave,’ a Dakota C-47 carrying twenty men, four Alouette III helicopters, three G-cars (G for Ground) and a K-car (K for kill), carrying four sticks, and a Lynx light-attack airplane, scrambles to the Bush. The ‘Land Tail’ follows in trucks with reinforcements and fuel for the choppers. The Dakota drops its parachutists in a line (drops were from 300-500 feet without reserve parachutes; as the last man jumped, the first hit the ground). The paratroopers then form a sweep line and advance towards the guerrillas. Contact ensues, and the guerrillas either flee or perish, most usually the former. Then, the Fireforce commander, circling above the area in the K-car, places his sticks to the path of the retreating guerrillas to act as ‘stops.’ The guerrillas are trapped between the hammer of the sweep line and the anvil of the ‘stops.’

⁴⁶ Melson, 74.

⁴⁷ Thomas Arbuckle, "Rhodesian Bush War Strategies and Tactics: An Assessment," *The RUSI Journal* 124, no. 4 (1979): 29.
doi:10.1080/03071847909441843.

Usually, there were five Fireforces, each stationed closed to an operational area. Tours lasted from three weeks to several months. As the war intensified, the Fireforce concept evolved. The main difference between early and later operations was the quicker positioning of 'stops' and the introduction of parachutists. Later, a 'super' Fireforce acted as national Quick Reaction Force (QRF).

It is crucial to highlight the strategic thinking behind the Fireforce concept: the military understood the war's realities: faced with personnel and technical shortages, a vast battlefield, and a more numerous enemy, they sought targeted missions rather than 'heart-and-minds' operations. Unsurprisingly, the men on the ground agreed: "The Special Branch," L/Cpl Chris Cocks, an RLI Troop Commander, recalled "wanted captures, it wanted documents, it wanted bodies to identify. But to the troops, this was a hassle and certainly of secondary importance to the 'proper' task at hand of killing."⁴⁸

Using Rhodesia's small air capabilities to the maximum benefit, Fireforce units achieved an 80:1 kill ratio. As a high-ranking officer explained, "Each operation is a planned operation; we tend to concentrate on one particular area where we get the best return for the men used." Fireforces attained relative superiority, a concept von Clausewitz supported when he wrote that "the greatest number of troops should be brought into action at the decisive point." Rhodesians were vastly outnumbered by the guerrillas, but by concentrating their forces, they exponentially increased their effectiveness. Their approach was centered on achieving relative superiority over a more numerous enemy. Without the Selous Scouts and SAS recon teams spotting the enemy and the RLI's exceptional close-combat skills, the Fireforce concept would not have been successful. And as a concept it was so effective that the South African Defence Forces (SADF) copied it in Angola and Namibia.

Externals

SOF units conducted external operations to deny the insurgency safe havens and destroy its training and equipment infrastructure. Most externals took place in Zambia, Mozambique, and Botswana (but they reached as far as Tanzania and Angola).⁴⁹ They

⁴⁸ Cocks, , *Fireforce: One Man's War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry*, 258.

⁴⁹ Flower, Ken. *Serving Secretly: An Intelligence Chief on Record: Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, 1964-1981*. (London: John Murray, 1987), 114.

varied in size, participants, and aim: They could be Selous Scouts in ‘flying columns’ (i.e., heavily armed trucks targeting large guerrilla camps); they could be huge Fireforce operations; usually, however, they were reconnaissance, ambush, sabotage, or leadership elimination missions conducted by small SAS and Selous Scouts teams (between two and eight men). During externals, operators used guerrilla weapons and uniforms, and European troops blackened their faces and wore balaclavas to hide their white skin.⁵⁰ Until 1975, externals were covert and deniable. Thereafter, as negotiations failed, the Rhodesian government did not care as much in denying them.

In 1974, the SAS conducted Rhodesia’s first major external operation against a ZIPRA camp in southern Zambia. More than 500 followed its lethal pattern. Small SOF reconnaissance teams would infiltrate behind enemy lines, gather intelligence, and then a larger force would destroy the target.⁵¹ The most successful external operation was Operation Dingo in 1977, when 165 SAS and RLI troopers raided a ZANLA camp in Mozambique, which housed close to 11,000 insurgents, and killed more than 5,000.⁵² During the war’s last phases, externals increased in volume and size because of the Fireforce’s devastating effectiveness in eliminating guerrillas within Rhodesia—there was simply not enough of them left! “There is no single day of the year when we are not operating beyond our border,” said General Walls in 1978.⁵³ SOF units were uniquely qualified to conduct such operations, which to be successful require the force to remain uncaught, due to their small size and concentrated lethality. Moreover, cross-border operations were vital given that they directly target the insurgency’s logistical and administrative powerbase.

Most important, however, was the strategy behind externals: Rhodesians sought to prevent rather than to mend—externals successfully took the fight to the enemy. Later, they also sought to destabilise the governments of Zambia and Mozambique by destroying vital infrastructure. By 1979, for instance, Zambia had become a

⁵⁰ Wood, 102.

⁵¹ Melson, *Fireforce: One Man’s War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry*, 57-59.

⁵² Wood, p.41; P. J. H. Petter-Bowyer, *Winds of Destruction: The Autobiography of a Rhodesian Combat Pilot* (Johannesburg: 30 Degrees South Publishers, 2013), 445-446.

⁵³ Melson, *Fireforce: One Man’s War in the Rhodesian Light Infantry*, 68.

virtually destroyed place within a 30km radius from the border, and there was only one bridge left standing in the country.⁵⁴

The nature of the conflict—isolated actions ranging from platoon to company size engagements—and manpower shortages meant that the conventional Rhodesian military was confined in a patrolling and policing role within Rhodesia. The more difficult and politically risky external operations were preserved for the Rhodesian SOF units. The Rhodesian strategy, thus, utilised the military's stronger attributes and avoided large-scale, simultaneous operations across the country.

Conclusion: Rhodesia

“In my professional judgment,” wrote in 1978 Sir Walter Walker, a former NATO commander, “based on more than 20 years’ experience of counter-insurgency and guerrilla type operations there is no doubt that Rhodesia now has the most professional and battle-worthy army in the world for this type of warfare.”⁵⁵

So, were Rhodesian SOF strategic? Undoubtedly. Often, Rhodesian SOF have been called ‘firemen,’ achieving extraordinary tactical feats of little strategic value.⁵⁶ But all operations are tactical. Puzzled together, however, they can become strategic. For example, external operations were strategic because they harassed, denied haven, destroyed vital infrastructure, and destabilized the foreign governments that supported the insurgents. They also targeted the Insurgency’s strategy (i.e., infiltrate in Rhodesia as many guerrillas as possible).⁵⁷ Through externals, the military sought and gained the initiative and offered politicians vital breathing space. Moreover, large externals were often the means to specific political ends. For example, in 1979, as the Lancaster House negotiations were underway, the Rhodesian SOF destroyed a huge ZANLA base in Mozambique, the New Chimoio, to weaken ZANU’s negotiating position.

On a first glimpse, Fireforces were tactical: they interdicted and destroyed guerrilla parties within Rhodesia. But glued together, they negated the insurgency’s infiltration strategy. Or, as Charles

⁵⁴ As the war intensified, conventional units also conducted some externals; Wood, p.47; Moorcraft, 53; 67.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 47, 66-68; Arbuckle, 30.

⁵⁷ Arbuckle, "Rhodesian Bush War Strategies and Tactics: An Assessment,"30.

Melson, Chief Historian, USMC, argues, they “allowed the Rhodesian security forces to fight the guerrilla incursions to a stand-still to allow time for political solutions to be negotiated.”⁵⁸

Furthermore, Rhodesian SOF operations have been branded as reactive.⁵⁹ Per standard counterinsurgency doctrine, a campaign must be 80% political (hearts-and-minds) and 20% military (body count). As a senior officer admitted: “We relied 90 per cent on force and 10 per cent on psychology and half of that went off half-cocked. The guerrillas relied 90 per cent on psychology and 10 per cent on force.”⁶⁰ But reactive or proactive is relative and contextual. On a first view, the military had two options to choose from: (a) a hearts-and-minds approach; or (b) a ‘body count’ approach. But the political, socioeconomic, and geographical realities, meant that only the latter was feasible.⁶¹ A hearts-and-minds strategy requires sufficient numbers to both secure the battlefield and interact with the population.⁶² Rhodesia had the numbers for only the former (On an average day, the Rhodesians could not field more than 1,500 servicemen).⁶³ Thus, the emphasis on Fireforces and externals instead of hearts-and-minds missions.

Externals were inherently pre-emptive rather than reactive operations, despite some historian’s claims.⁶⁴ Their goal was to destroy the insurgency’s capacity to wage war: they sought to prevent not heal, as a hearts-and-minds operation would do. Discussing externals, the Rhodesian Foreign Minister P.K. van der Byl said that, “It’s defence. It’s all part of the same thing. It is absolutely self-defence what we did.”⁶⁵ And even doubters agree that through externals and Fireforces the military gained and held the strategic initiative till the end.⁶⁶ And

⁵⁸ Wood, 14.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 44; Arbuckle, 32.

⁶⁰ Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 199.

⁶¹ Interestingly, Paul Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, proponents of the ‘unstrategic camp’ acknowledges these limitations; Moorcraft, 47.

⁶² Riley M. Moore, "Counterinsurgency Force Ratio: Strategic Utility or Nominal Necessity," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24, no. 5 (2013): 856-857.

⁶³ Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 38.

⁶⁴ Arbuckle, 32.

⁶⁵ AP Archive. *Synd 3 6 77 Rhodesian Foreign Minister Van der Byl Interview*. (1977. Salisbury, 2015), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nT-uuKnCkrA>

⁶⁶ Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 63.

the numbers are telling: by 1980, Security Forces had killed 40,000 insurgents to the cost of 1,735 men, a 23:1 kill ratio.⁶⁷

That is not to say, of course, that the Rhodesian *overall* strategy was proper. Yet to argue, as some historians have done, that its military element was erroneous and that a hearts-and-minds approach would have been successful is correct only in theory.⁶⁸ History has shown that an insurgency is only defeated by winning the population. The Rhodesian military, of course, understood that ideal strategy would have to be centered on winning the population—although undoubtedly segregationist, the military was apolitical; the troops served a black PM equally well as a white PM.⁶⁹ General Walls (who had personal experience of an effective hearts-and-minds campaign from Malaya, where he had commanded ‘C’ Squadron SAS) said in an interview that, “you lose the war if you have the civilian population against you. You win if you have them with you”⁷⁰ Further, the Rhodesian Army’s counterinsurgency manual stated that:

“Political policy and offensive action by the military forces are essential for seizing and holding the initiative. . . [but] no single program—political, social, psychological, economic or military—will in itself succeed. It is a combination of these elements, together with a joint government/police/military approach to the problem, which will counter the efforts of the enemy, and restore lawful authority.”⁷¹

But such a strategy mandates political purpose, something that the Rhodesian politics lacked—they were short-sighted and often contradictory. Ian Smith and Foreign Minister P. K. van der Byl wished to maintain the status quo (White minority rule and no compromise); but General Walls and Ken Flower, the head of the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), understood that victory could come only through compromise. And the military strategy (buy time for political settlement) reflected their views. “I made it clear,” said General Walls, “when I became Commander of the Army in 1972 that one cannot win this war by purely military means.”⁷² A year later, in the process of

⁶⁷ Wood, 48.

⁶⁸ Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 196-200; Arbuckle, 32.

⁶⁹ Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 199.

⁷⁰ Roger Marston, “Not Ordinary White People”: The Origins of Rhodesian COIN Theory and Practice,” *The RUSI Journal* 131, no. 4 (1986): 26, doi:10.1080/03071848608522735.

⁷¹ Rhodesian Army, *Counter Insurgency Manual* (Salisbury: Rhodesian Army, 1974), 6-7.

⁷² Moorcraft & McLaughlin, 66.

forming the Selous Scouts, General Walls again emphasized that “time is not on our side. Yesterday is too late.”⁷³

Ironically, the military proved so successful in their strategy of buying time, that the government became complacent and sought little compromise. In the end, SOF were strategically crucial in the success of the wrong strategy.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency expert Dr Michael Evans states that “if the politics of a counterinsurgency campaign are misconceived, then the strategy drawn from those politics is almost certain to be flawed.”⁷⁴ It follows, thus, that wars of every nature are won or lost in the politicians’ offices. Both conventional and SOF units are tools in a policymaker’s toolkit. Their tactical or strategic impact depends not on their capabilities but their employment.

In Oman, the British political strategy was to support the Sultan, which would stabilize and secure the region and thus enable profitable geopolitical and commercial arrangements. Secrecy, however, was a crucial factor that informed British strategy. The US was fighting an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam. British forces were also engaged in Northern Ireland. Thus, British politicians dreaded the negative publicity of a protracted war in Oman.⁷⁵ The secretive SAS, therefore, offered an ideal strategic choice. Their capabilities (light footprint, highly trained, flexible, culturally savvy—e.g., they could speak Arabic, they had veterinary capabilities, and every trooper had medical training, both vital during hearts-and-minds operations) enabled victory through the CAT and firqat initiatives, which the latter has been acknowledged as “a key element of the SAF’s strategic offensive.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Ron Reid Daly and Peter Stiff, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (London: Galago, 1983), 45.

⁷⁴ Michael Evans, “The Wretched of the Empire: Politics, Ideology and Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia, 1965–80,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 2 (2007): p. 176, doi:10.1080/09574040701400601.

⁷⁵ Ian Gardiner (retired Brigadier, RM) in discussion with the author, May-August 2017.

⁷⁶ Austin G. Long, *Locals Rule: Historical Lessons for Creating Local Defense Forces for Afghanistan and beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND/National Defense Research Institute, 2012), 94.

In Rhodesia, there was not a coherent political strategy. Although faced with an insurgency, Rhodesian politicians did not pursue a hearts-and-minds strategy that would have enabled overall victory (they did ‘win’ in the field). Military leaders, on the contrary, did understand the war’s political nature—numerous primary sources support this. Thus, they sought to buy time for their political masters. And they relied on SOF because of their direct-action, special reconnaissance and unconventional warfare capabilities.

Up till the early 1970s, when the insurgency was unorganized and impotent, SOF supported the police operations, mainly through border defense and limited external operations. The political strategy at that point was to maintain the status quo (i.e., minority rule), something that was enhanced by the initial socio-economic success of the UDI.

Thereafter, once the insurgency had reorganized and shifted its strategy, SOF continued in their containment approach. The Rhodesian government, complacent by the military’s success in dealing with the insurgents, did not resolute to a clear political objective. As negotiations failed and the war intensified, SOF bought time, through externals and Fireforces, for the politicians to formulate a political strategy or to reach a compromise.