



50th Anniversary for Rhodesians Mark Dale

Australians know that 11th November is not only Armistice Day but is also the day of “The Dismissal”. This year will be the 40th anniversary of the fateful day when Governor General Sir John Kerr sacked Gough Whitlam and precipitated the most critical constitutional crisis in Australian history.

For one-time Rhodesians that date, but 10 years earlier was even more noteworthy. On 11th November 1965 Rhodesian Prime Minister, Ian Smith, declared independence unilaterally from Britain. Smith was a World War II Spitfire pilot and chose that date deliberately.

Rhodesia has been Zimbabwe for thirty five years and Australians, if they know anything about



Rhodesia it is probably the black and white view seen through the hindsight spectacles of political correctness. Australians have been told by the media that Rhodesia was a white supremacist country overdue to be made redundant by history. Rhodesia was much more than that.

Rhodesia was a unique component of the British Empire. It had started off as a private company owned by Cecil Rhodes. When Rhodes was politically disgraced, the company foundered and the white settlers took the administration into their own hands. The First World War intervened and Rhodesians fought in Africa and Europe. In the aftermath of the war they decided not to link with South Africa but to become a self-governing British Colony. The country prospered steadily. A white population about the same as a large regional Australian city ran a fully functioning country with all the actions of government, civil, military, commercial and industrial. It pulled itself up by its bootstraps and needed no handouts. It fed itself and provided a surplus for the less efficient surrounding countries.

I arrived in Rhodesia as a young student. At that time there was a political constitution that allowed for some black representation in parliament. The constitution was designed so that as Africans increased their wealth and education, so they increased their representation until there would eventually be a black majority. However the world was changing too fast to allow such gradualism. After the Second World War, colonial empires were crumbling. Britain was a benign colonial master and only faced minor insurrections in its overseas possessions but decided to shed its overseas possessions and concentrate on its own newly minted welfare state. Throughout Africa

nationalist leaders saw their chance and appeared at the head of howling mobs. A compliant Britain rapidly handed out Westminster constitutions and rotated members of the Royal Family to pull down the Union Jack at a steady stream of independence ceremonies.

Rhodesia was a problem for Britain. The only hold it had over the country was that it was responsible for the country's external affairs and used this to prevent any independence for Rhodesia. Unsurprisingly white opinion in Rhodesia had hardened and a right wing, farmer government was voted in. Shortly afterwards the grimly determined Ian Smith replaced the incumbent PM. Interminable negotiations with the UK got nowhere and finally Smith made his move on 11th November 1965. I was in the Rhodesian Army at the time undergoing national service training. For a while I thought I might have to shoot at British soldiers but it never came to that. Sanctions were imposed on Rhodesia but with a collaborating South Africa to the south and Portuguese possessions on our flanks, the effect was minimised. There was only the northern border with a black African country and that country was dependant on us for its main supply route. The main effect of sanctions was to bring in a policy of import substitution. Many new industries and projects started and for a while the economy boomed.

While Smith's unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) had not turned out to be the three month wonder he had expected, he was fairly complacent. There had been cross-border terrorist incursions in the ensuing five years but they were swiftly dealt with by the security forces. A basic rule of statesmanship was ignored. That is that military success is not enough. Ultimately it must be followed up with a political solution. Instead of a negotiated settlement with African nationalist leaders from a position of strength, the Smith government decided the African majority would just have to be satisfied with the status quo of limited opportunity and racial discrimination under minority white rule.

Things really started to turn sour for Rhodesia when the Portuguese Empire collapsed. Suddenly nearly all our border was porous to terrorists and another unpalatable truth became evident. Poorly trained communist insurgents do not have to be good soldiers to be effective terrorists. The Rhodesian security forces were effective militarily, particularly the Special Forces. The SAS, outnumbered 10 to 1 would take on insurgent camps outside our borders and eradicate them. Inside the country the unique Selous Scouts, a fully racially integrated unit, skulked in the bush as pseudo terrorists and destroyed many insurgents. Nevertheless Chinese and Russian sponsored terrorists continued to seep into the country in increasing numbers, laying land mines, attacking isolated homesteads, subverting the local rural population and trying to avoid any contact with the security forces.

The South African government had a policy of quarantining its own external insurgency problems by using its neighbours as buffers. The South African government was run by the hardline Afrikaner Nationalist Party. They had gained government after WW II, then initiated a gerrymander and remained continuously in power. Initially the South African government provided us the trade routes, assisted with military material and even some police manpower but as the Rhodesian bush war stretched beyond a decade they wearied of the support and some with long memories of the Boer war were ambivalent about supporting those English speaking whites north of the Zambezi. With a stroke of realpolitik South Africa cut off the flow of critical imports to Rhodesia and forced the country to capitulate. Fortunately the UK through Maggie Thatcher provided the stability for an orderly transfer of power and so 14 years after UDI, we had Robert Mugabe as the new Republic of Zimbabwe's leader. Initially it was a relief to find he was not the Pol Pot equivalent we had feared. In fact he gave intelligent and magnanimous speeches. He was championed by Malcolm Fraser. He had doctorates bestowed on him by an adoring socialist left. It was worrying though that his closest

chums were the worst of the tyrannical communist states, namely Bulgaria and particularly North Korea.

Gradually the real Mugabe emerged. Rather than make the effort of running the complex modern economy and efficient infrastructure that he inherited, he preferred to become a paramount tribal thug similar to many of the tyrants found elsewhere in Africa. He ran a kleptocracy based on patronage. The web that held the hierarchy together was corruption. Corruption is essential so that the leader has a hold over his cronies. Mugabe sent his infamous North Korean brigade to the west of the country to slaughter thousands of Ndebele. He sent the national army to the Congo in search of loot. Meanwhile at home the country spiralled into impoverishment. He printed money that led to inflation that surpassed even that of the German Weimar republic. A significant proportion of the population is now outside the country seeking work and an existence at least marginally better than poverty and hopelessness at home.

There is always enough for the favoured few at the top of the dung heap. Mugabe and his close cronies have enjoyed lavish lifestyles for decades. Intriguingly Mugabe, now 90 years old, looks and sounds little different from the Mugabe I left behind 35 years ago. He is a little bulkier round the middle but I put that down to a bullet proof vest under his stylish suit. If I believed in the supernatural I would say he had sold his soul to the devil.

My own Rhodesian bush war experience was quite modest. It involved many days and nights away from my regular job, patrolling and observing in the bush with just a very few fleeting encounters with terrorists. However it was life changing enough for me to gather some horded remnants of uniform and resolve to attend the remembrance service on the 11th November at the local cenotaph. I will reflect on people I knew who were cut down in the war. Perhaps I will find the odd kindred spirit there too.

Mark Dale
Victor Harbor
South Australia
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