The Selous Scouts: Black Ops Elite for a Doomed Cause

By Kelly Bell

One of the notable units to come out of the 1964-79 Rhodesian Bush War (a.k.a. the Second Chimurenga War and the Zimbabwe War of Liberation) was the Selous Scouts. The unit was organized to fight using the same tactics as the enemy guerrillas of the ZANLA/ZANU and ZIPRA/ZAPU factions and defeat them. The Selous Scouts engaged in a wide range of operations, from “fireforce” actions on open battlefields to clandestine missions in enemy territory.

The Rhodesian military created the Scouts in 1973 as a tracking unit to locate guerrillas infiltrating across the border and then call in larger conventional unit to eliminate them. Command of the units was given to Lt. Col. Ron Reid-Daly, a retired army officer with a background in counterinsurgency warfare. The unit’s missions quickly expanded to include a further range of operations, including “externals” (raids against enemy bases in adjoining countries), and other clandestine activities.

The Scouts were trained to operate in small teams that spent long stretches in the bush and were able to pass themselves off as insurgents. Every trooper was a volunteer, and only 12 percent of the applicant pool passed the selection process. A scout had to be able to work both as part of a team and as a loner capable of thinking and acting on his own. Daly described the ideal scout candidate as “a certain very special type of man. In his profile it is necessary to look for intelligence, fortitude and guts, potential, loyalty, dedication, a deep sense of professionalism, maturity—the ideal age being 24 to 32 years—responsibility and self-discipline.”

That list makes it easy to understand why so many hopefuls fell by the wayside and, in turn, why the Scouts acted so determinedly in their recruiting efforts when such men were identified. When recruiting opened, many lined up to join. Many of those first volunteers were formerly of the British South Africa Police Special Branch. They had specialized skills in intelligence and combat tracking that were vital for the new unit. Others recruits came from abroad: South Africans,
British and Americans, among others, bringing with them a wealth of varied military experience. Blacks were also recruited in order to take advantage of their ability to infiltrate insurgent ranks. That was also done to create a more favorable internal political situation by giving them a stake in the country. Indeed, most of the Rhodesian active armed forces came to be composed of blacks who, for various reasons, saw the government of Ian Smith as preferable to the political agenda of the insurgents. Defecting guerrillas were especially prized as recruits. Given the choice between imprisonment or joining the Scouts, many eagerly signed on. Even some already in prison were accepted. Daly’s operatives would fake their escapes from jail and whisk them away to training facilities. The notion of recruiting and rearming enemy combatants, many of whom had been under arms since childhood, was unpalatable to some Rhodesians; nevertheless, Daly considered them essential for the accomplishment of some missions.

Gaining intelligence about the enemy has always been a vital part of unconventional warfare, and one of the best ways to do that is via the “pseudo-gang” ploy, in which small counterinsurgent units disguise themselves as guerrillas. The British Army had some experience in that tactic from its various small wars at the end of the colonial era and, in turn, many Rhodesians had experience serving in those conflicts. It was found that turned guerrillas generally performed well. The size of the Selous Scouts varied. By late in the war they had 420 men on the rolls. The standard tactical unit was the troop, a platoon-sized formation composed of three sections of nine to 12 men each.

**Black Ops**

The Scouts’ main mission was intelligence gathering: determining the locations of insurgent units, uncovering their plans, and pinpointing their bases and lines of supply. Undercover scouts infiltrated insurgent units and they moved freely through enemy areas. Gathered information was passed to other branches of the armed forces and whisked away to training camps at its conclusion. Following that initiation they were given a week of leave, and then taken to another facility for what was called the “dark phase” of training. That advanced training camp was laid out to resemble a clandestine guerrilla installation. There the men were taught more combat tactics, counter-ambush drills and the use of communist bloc weapons. Enemy tactics were studied so they could be countered or imitated when needed for infiltration.

A critical part of dark phase training concerned how to impersonate guerrillas in preparation for infiltrating enemy areas. Recruits learned to avoid shaving while getting used to going to bed and rising at irregular hours. Non-smokers practiced deeply inhaling smoke from strong Soviet-made machorka tobacco without coughing, and teetotalers learned to hold their liquor. They were taught to talk and walk like guerrillas and to live the insurgent lifestyle in a convincing fashion.

Fieldcraft was critical, including dealing with big game such as elephants, rhinoceroses and lions. Troops were taught to avoid shooting at such targets, since their military rifles weren’t powerful enough to bring them down quickly and could instead start stampedes. The course finished up with parachute qualification, both static line and free fall. Eight and a half months after joining, recruits were ready to graduate as entry level Selous Scouts.

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**Becoming a Scout**

Volunteers for the Selous Scouts faced great challenges in simply becoming qualified to join the unit. Just the trip to the boot camp at Wafa Wafa, on the shores of Lake Kariba, was a major trial. Dropped off by helicopter 15 miles from Wafa Wafa, 60-man groups of recruits had to trek the distance to the training compound. Upon arriving they found nothing but a few crude huts.

Motivation was determined by pushing the volunteers to their limits via an exhaustive training regimen. For the first few days the trainees were given a single one meal ration pack to eat. Then they were allowed some rancid animal carcasses and could go out and forage. Generally, the majority of each new group dropped out after two days, returning to their original units or prison. The initial training lasted 17 days. From dawn until 7:00 p.m. the recruits conducted calisthenics and drills in basic combat techniques. They also had to traverse obstacle courses designed to banish the fear of heights and insist on confidence. When the sun went down they undertook night combat exercises.

They celebrated completion of that initial part of their training with a 62 mile hike, with each man carrying a backpack containing 66 lbs. of rocks. The rocks were painted red so no one could cheat by discarding some at the march’s start and then refilling his pack at its conclusion. Following that initiation they were given a week of leave, and were then taken to another facility for what was called the “dark phase” of training.

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forces and police who would take action, such as sending in a “fireforce” (see page 47) to destroy a guerilla unit, or driving a truck to the edge of a contact area. “Each movement had a different approach to the Rhodesian war’s strategy was that of Miassist insurgency, relying on mass mobilization. ZIPRA worked toward building up enough insurgency, relying on mass mobilization. ZIPRA worked toward building up enough

President of civil services was done to maintain the support of the African population, while the BSAP and combat units provided protection and kept the guerrillas off balance. Raids against insurgent sanctuaries in adjoining countries were supposed to seize the initiative and make it politically expensive for those governments to maintain support for the insurgents. was divided into operational areas with codenames such as “Horses” and “Thresher.” Each