



RHODESIA'S DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT (NPWLM) AND THE VOLUNTEER TRACKER UNIT (VTU)

A brief overview by Edward Ostrosky, previously senior ranger with NPWLM, and member of VTU 1976-1979

*"Undoubtedly, they rate a well-deserved place in the military history of Rhodesia."
Lieutenant General J.S.V. Hickman CLM.MC*

This document is intended to give those interested in Rhodesia's military history a brief overview of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management's Volunteer Tracker Unit (VTU). Members of the VTU served with distinction throughout the bush-war years but are seldom mentioned and never accorded the recognition they deserve as serving members of Rhodesia's security forces. While many members of the VTU had served in Rhodesia's army or police, others, such as myself, and all the game scouts, donned the uniform and went into combat as civilians, without pay, rank or even force numbers. Though some of the information comes from my personal experiences, I have consulted the books noted in the text. However, all errors and omissions are mine. I humbly apologise to the Volunteer Tracker Unit's members, white and black, that I could not mention each of you by name and record your deeds as they deserve.

BEGINNINGS

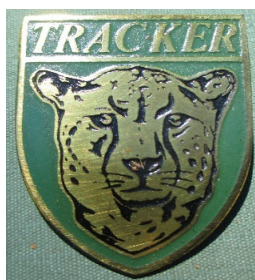
The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management can trace its roots back to 1928, when Ted Davidson was appointed as the first Warden of Wankie National Park. The **Department of National Parks** was established under the Ministry of Lands in 1949, followed by the creation of the **Southern Rhodesia Game Department** in 1952. In 1958 the Federal National Parks Board was established, and the Federal Government assumed control of Southern Rhodesia's national parks. Meanwhile, in 1960 the **Southern Rhodesia Game Department** became a fully-fledged department under the Ministry of Lands, and in 1961 was re-designated the **Department of Wildlife Conservation**. The final act was to amalgamate the two organisations, National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, into the **Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management (NPWLM)**. This was done in 1963.

Rhodesia's largest conservation areas and the rangers and wardens that manned them were mostly on international borders. Though NPWLM had supplied trackers to Rhodesia's military on an *ad hoc* basis, their direct participation in Rhodesia's counter-insurgency war started with Operation Nickel in 1967. A group of 79 ZAPU and SAANC insurgents crossed the border at Batoka Gorge and based up on the banks of the Deka River in Wankie National Park. They then split into two groups, one of 48 and another of 21. Security forces engaged the groups on the Inyantue River and near Leash Pan as they moved southward into the Tjolutjo Tribal Trust Land (TTL). NPWLM game scouts assisted with tracking, and Rangers Ronnie van Heerden and Willie de Beer (previously a Rhodesian army warrant officer) located tracks of two terrorists. One terrorist was shot and killed by Ranger van Heerden with his .30-06 rifle.

In 1968, Ranger Dave Scammell found terrorist tracks in the Zambezi Valley and Operation Caldron was initiated.

The war intensified in 1973, and Ranger Robin Hughes and Mike Bromwich were on attachment to the army. Hughes was killed in action on the 18th of October while involved in pseudo operation. Game rangers and scouts participated in other follow-ups with the Combat Tracker Unit and when requested by JOC commanders in their regular areas of operation. (Detailed accounts of these and other operations can be found in '*National Parks and Wildlife Management, Rhodesia and Zimbabwe 1928-1990*' by Mike Bromwich. '*Masodja*' and '*The Saints*', by Alexandre Binda.)

A visitor's vehicle detonated the first land mine in Mana Pools National Park on 30 August 1972, and from then onward, Mana was subjected to frequent incidents of terrorism. In order to maintain a presence on the Zambezi River, work started on Fort Mana in June 1974. From then on, Mana would be a key but costly asset. In early 1974, ZIPRA attacked D Camp, downstream of Mana, and Ranger Richard Aylward was seriously injured when his vehicle detonated a land mine a few days later. The following year Ranger Mike Jones was critically injured by a mine at Vundu camp, while Ranger D. Winhall received minor shrapnel wounds. Elsewhere, game scouts Smuyamba and Angus were shot and killed while on duty.



VOULENTEER TRACKER UNIT (VTU)

As previously noted, NPWLM trackers were called on to assist the Rhodesian Army with follow-ups throughout the war. However, in 1972 Warden Paul Coetzee and Lieutenant D. Parker of the Rhodesian Light Infantry formalised arrangements, and the National Parks Volunteer Tracking Unit (VTU) was born. Initially, Warden Coetzee controlled deployments from Sinoia, but in 1976 control moved to Head Office and fell under the control of Roy Killick.

Though there were endless variations, members of VTU sticks usually reported to Roy Killick in Salisbury and were deployed to Forward Airfields or JOCs as directed by COMOPS. All white officers, regardless of previous army or police ranks, or their position within National Parks, were treated as, and messed with, the receiving unit's non-commissioned officers. Game scouts were accommodated and messed with the enlisted, other ranks.

All VTU members wore regular Rhodesian army camouflage uniforms - often camo shirts, PT shorts and hockey boots. However, later in the war, when operating with the Rhodesian Light Infantry on fireforce, long camouflage trousers and 'black is beautiful' camo cream were mandatory. Many rangers chose to use chest webbing, usually made by Fereday and Sons, with regulation web belts and accoutrements. The trick was to travel light but have at least a sleeping bag, a gas cooker, and enough food for a meal or two. By 1976 all VTU members were armed with 7.62 mm, FN FAL rifles and four twenty round magazines. In addition, supporting units supplied hand grenades, smoke grenades, rifle grenades and additional medical kit as

required. When operating independently in conservation areas during 1979, VTU sticks sometimes carried captured weapons such as RPD light machine guns.

VTU sticks were on constant standby for deployment to incursions, farm attacks, ambushes, land mine incidents, abductions or other incidents as directed by the JOC commander. As the VTU stick needed to get onto tracks as soon as possible, they were usually deployed by helicopter. However, recovery to base was sometimes problematic and depended on available transport. In one case, after a lengthy follow-up, Senior Ranger Ron Wienand, the writer, two trackers and the 1 Independent Company (Wankie) backup stick caught a lift with a convoy of passing fishermen.

Another difference between members of the Volunteer Tracker Unit and territorial units was that, at the conclusion of their call-ups, most VTU members returned to their regular duty stations in operational areas. Back at base, they did the same work, but without backup.

Two VTU members were killed in action in 1976. Senior Ranger Richard Smith was killed in action on 20 February while on a VTU call-up with the RLI. According to one account of the Battle of Chibara Hills, the initial follow-up group consisted of eight men of 3 Troop and three National Parks trackers led by Richard Smith. The VTU stick and its backup were ferried forward to join 4 Troop and again to join Ian Scott's 1 Troop. The bush was extremely thick, and two 1 Commando trackers, Sergeant Pete White and Corporal Cookson, were both killed by unseen enemies. Soon afterwards, 1 Troop was ambushed, Trooper Diedericks was killed, and Ranger Smith, who was next to Scott, was mortally wounded. He died of his wounds in the helicopter on the way to Karanda Mission. Ranger N.J.R. (Nick) Gregory died from wounds received in action on 9 November 1976, while on a three-week VTU call-up with Senior Ranger Charles Mackie. They were operating with 1 RR (1 Battalion Rhodesia Regiment) and the RLI west of Mukumbura. According to Charles Mackie, it was dark, and they had become separated when a bullet hit Gregory's shoulder and penetrated his lungs. Unfortunately, darkness and rain prevented immediate casevac, and he died of his wounds en route to Mount Darwin. Bodies of 23 insurgents were counted the next day.

NPWLM's casualties continued to mount. On 20 December 1976, Chizarira National Park's headquarters was attacked and destroyed. Fifteen staff members were abducted for 'further education' in Zambia and were loaded on inflatable boats. However, the Kariba Boat Squadron intercepted and sunk the boats, and two staff members drowned. During 1977 game scouts Jolamu and Ndabezinhle were shot dead by terrorists at Matetsi, and game scout Marume was abducted and murdered while on leave.

Though Fort Mana held the line on the Zambezi, it had to be resupplied by way of a gravel road that ran through dense mopane and jesse. On 20 March 1977, Ranger Gerry Bell and game scouts Mafairos, Marufu and Zovoro were killed during an ambush on the Mana Pools access road, and on 25 December 1977, Ranger Minnaar was killed in the same area.

Wankie was also a target. On 12 January 1978, Research Technician Russell Williams was killed in action while participating in a follow-up near Wankie Main Camp. Then, in March 1978, VTU members Senior Ranger Charles Mackie and Tom Fynn set off with four black VTU members and a scratch force of eight to check for terrorist movements in the Mitswiri Area. The ill-equipped patrol was ambushed, and Charlie Mackie was seriously wounded by an M60 rifle grenade in the opening salvo. However, despite both rangers being out of action, the scouts,

armed with Fynn's damaged single-shot FN and their bolt-action Lee Enfields, managed to hold off repeated attacks, and the ZIPRA force withdrew.

In late 1978, due to complaints by VTU members about the quality of backup provided by some security force elements, COMOPS agreed that VTU call-signs would track for the Rhodesian Light Infantry only. The move was welcomed by many, but the RLI seldom needed traditional 'Sparrow' trackers when engaged in Fire Force activities, and white members were absorbed into the undermanned RLI sticks. Black trackers, who would have been mistakenly *taken out* by the all-white commandos, cooled their heels in camp. However, with Fire Force, external operations, expanding 'liberated' areas, and the advent of *Pfumo re Vahnu*, the usefulness of traditional tracking units like VTU was re-evaluated. From May 1979, VTU sticks were deployed to selected NPWLM bases in border areas. They actively patrolled, supported local operations and tracked for other units when called to do so. Marongora was one such base, and it was due to this final change that Warden Oliver Coltman's VTU stick was at Fort Mana in May 1979.

ZIPRA's 17 May 1979 attack on Fort Mana was the longest sustained attack on a Rhodesian base during the entire war. The attack started with a bombardment of the Mana complex with B10 recoilless rifles, 82 mm mortars and 14.5 mm AA guns. Fortunately, the staff complement of rangers, scouts and NS was supplemented by the presence of Warden Oliver Coltman and his VTU team. Nevertheless, shelling and ground assaults continued through the night while the defenders replied with rifle, Bren, MAG and 60 mm commando mortar fire. Fort Mana held, and in the morning, a Dakota dropped a resupply of ammunition by parachute. During subsequent sweeps, seven dead ZIPRA were found, including one that had reached the perimeter fence. Seventy-six firing positions were found along with blood trails, bloody bandages and wheel tracks of the B10 recoilless rifle. In a subsequent follow-up by Provincial Warden Ronnie van Heerden's VTU stick, the writer and trackers located ZIPRA's forward base, and various items were recovered. Later intelligence indicated that a further fifteen ZIPRA died of wounds sustained in the attack.

Perhaps the last contact involving a regular VTU call-sign occurred on 11 October 1979 in the Zambezi Valley, along the Mashayenyi River below Nhawa Hill. The call-sign consisting of Ronnie van Heerden, Ed Ostrosky, Gordon Putterill, Phungwe and Goliad engaged a ZIPRA unit of unknown size, killing one, and capturing one PPSH 41 submachine gun and seven rucksacks loaded with AK ammunition, M60 rifle grenades and land mines. At the end of the deployment, John White's VTU team took over. However, they were recalled a few days later to attend the funeral of Senior Ranger Tim Wellington (Territorial SAS), who had been killed by an elephant in Wankie.

While the National Parks Volunteer Tracker unit stood down when the cease-fire took effect in December 1979, thousands of ZIPRA troops soon occupied the assembly point at Rukomechi, known as Papa Camp. When a patrol reported poaching and the possible wounding of a rhino, Senior Ranger Nevin Lees-May and Rangers Andy Gibson, Ken Jones, and several game scouts went to investigate. They were ambushed by ten or more ZIPRA near Nyakasikana, and in the ensuing shoot-out, one ZIPRA was killed, and one was captured. The next day a trailer, towed by a Water Development vehicle, detonated a land mine on the Nyamomba Road, and NPWLM staff went back to using hardened, mine-protected vehicles. The situation remained tense until the ZIPRA were moved to Mashumbi Pools in the Dande Tribal Trust Land at the end of August 1980.

Warden Mike Bromwich published Lieutenant General J.S.V. Hickman's tribute to National Parks Trackers in his superbly researched book, '*National Parks and Wildlife Management, Rhodesia and Zimbabwe 1928-1990.*'

A tribute by Lieutenant General J.S.V. Hickman CLM.MC

"In a rural campaign to counter insurgency, tracking is a vital component in efforts to bring the enemy into contact. Yet, despite all four African battalions, and C Squadron Special Air Services, having combat tracking experience in Malaya prior to and during Federation (The Federation of Rhodesia & Nyasaland 1953-1963), the Rhodesian Army was ill-prepared in this important art during the early days of our bush-war and it took some time for this to evolve.

"In the early '60s the Army used two notable characters, both exceptionally bush-wise in the art of tracking. Marviri and Mbereko, who were hunter-and-miner Jack Fynn's trackers, were used for border control patrols and nearly all the operational follow ups of that period. They were remarkable for their knowledge of bush-lore and soon adapted to the sometimes easier ability to track humans. So much so, that it was common knowledge that when either stopped and said that they'd go no farther, we were certain of an imminent contact. Grand old men – they did us proud in those early days and deserved much credit for our successes.

"However, as the insurgency intensified, we needed more trackers and although we had started to train our own military combat trackers, particularly in the SAS, the Department of Wildlife Management & National Parks stepped boldly into the breach. Teams of a ranger (later two rangers) and his two scouts became a familiar sight leading patrols into contact. These brave men were all volunteers, and while the rangers themselves may have had periodic military commitment through the Territorial Force, the scouts were in every respect civilians. Yet, here they were leading us professionals, as it were, into battle. At point, in our tactical formations, they were in the most vulnerable and dangerous position, mostly unarmed and unversed in military procedures and under serious counterfire. (Note: Game scouts were trained, and by the time I joined the VTU in 1976, all ranks were armed with FN FAL rifles)

"With us, they lived rough in all conditions of weather. They all freely and willingly gave of their valuable time and skills. Some, in fact, gave their very lives, and provided the army with invaluable assistance in our time of need. In fact, they gave us magnificent support. They all deserve our gratitude, high tribute and great praise. Undoubtedly they rate a well-deserved place in the military history of Rhodesia."

(Note: Text in parentheses was inserted by the writer for clarity)

End

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Mike Bromwich for allowing me to quote from his book and John White Hans van der Heiden for their input. I also wish to thank the late Tommy Fynn for looking over the draft.