

OPERATION QUARTZ - RHODESIA 1980

by R. Allport

The 1980 Elections

After the election of Bishop Muzorewa's government in 1979, Rhodesians hoped that Britain and the international community would recognise his administration and end sanctions. After all, British observers had pronounced the election free and fair in their [official report](#). African voters had turned out in great numbers to vote for the Bishop, and, with a few minor exceptions, there had been no intimidation or coercion. The Rhodesians rightly felt that they had fulfilled the demands of the international community for African majority rule in Rhodesia, now renamed Zimbabwe-Rhodesia.

Nyerere of Tanzania and Kaunda of Zambia, however, objected at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Lusaka in August 1979, demanding that their proteges, Mugabe and Nkomo, leaders of the two main terrorist groups seeking power, should be included in any final arrangement for majority rule in Rhodesia. Their pressure was instrumental in causing Thatcher to withhold recognition. The fact that Muzorewa had been democratically elected into power by a 67% majority, whereas his critics, Kaunda and Nyerere, were both heads of one-party dictatorships with shaky economies (Kaunda had even been unable to provide a red carpet for the Queen at the Lusaka meeting and had been forced to borrow one from "arch-enemy" South Africa...)

Pressure thus mounted for the Rhodesians to hold new elections, again monitored by the Commonwealth, but this time including Mugabe and Nkomo's parties. Tired of the war and sanctions, and with the increasing level of white emigration seriously affecting the economy, Muzorewa was eventually forced into going along with an agreement for a new election.

The fact that the Rhodesian security forces were increasing their cross-border raids on terrorist bases in Zambia and Mozambique persuaded Presidents Kaunda and Machel to exert their influence on Nkomo and Mugabe to moderate their conditions for participating in the new election. Mugabe, for example, had initially demanded that the Rhodesian security forces be disbanded prior to the election and that the country be policed by a combination of the terrorist forces. This was a condition to which the Rhodesians would never agree, as it was a patently transparent attempt by ZANU to ensure its forces would have de facto control of the country prior to the election, and allow him to influence the voting and ignore any result unfavourable to ZANU. The resulting distrust that Rhodesians felt for Mugabe's methods and manoeuvrings was probably the prime reason behind the preparation of a contingency plan.

Eventually agreement was reached for the holding of new elections. Commonwealth monitoring forces arrived in Rhodesia and the terrorist forces of ZAPU and ZANU began to send their men to Assembly Points throughout the country.

At midnight on 28 December 1979 a ceasefire came into effect. The majority of white Rhodesians hoped or expected that Muzorewa would again secure a majority vote. However, it did not take long for experts such as John Redfern, Director of Military Intelligence, to work out that this would not come to pass. For one thing, thousands of armed ZANLA terrorists remained at large inside the country. In their place in the Assembly Points were thousands of youngsters masquerading as guerrillas, leaving the real terrorists free to intimidate the population and influence the voting. Commanders of the Rhodesian security forces informed General Walls of this, and he tried to persuade Lord Soames, the temporary governor sent out by Britain to preside over the election, to disqualify ZANU. Soames gave Mugabe several warnings, but took no further action to prevent ZANU from taking part in the election.

Prior to the election a military intelligence paper was prepared by Rhodesian officers, setting out the possible courses of action for opposing ZAPU and ZANU, and preventing them from winning the election. A second intelligence paper predicted a victory for Mugabe and warned that this could precipitate a rush of victorious terrorists into the capital, Salisbury, confronting white civilians and the security forces. Further studies described what would be "Vital Assets Ground" in the event of this

happening and detailed action that would need to be taken to retain these strategic areas. The papers also stressed the need in this case to swiftly "neutralize" the terrorist Assembly Points. Members of COMOPS and Special Branch involved in drafting these papers appeared to be convinced of the need for some sort of pre-emptive action to prevent the country from falling into chaos.

Operation Quartz

These intelligence papers probably formed the basis of the plan that was given the code-name "Operation Quartz". This plan envisaged placing Rhodesian troops at strategic points from which they could simultaneously wipe out the terrorists at the Assembly Points and assassinate Mugabe and the other terrorist leaders at their campaign headquarters. The strike would be assisted by Puma helicopters of the South African Air Force and would involve the participation of elite Recce units of the South African army. Clearly the Rhodesians had discussed Operation Quartz with their counterparts in the SADF and obtained their approval and co-operation. Lord Soames had already agreed to allow 400 South African troops into the country in order to protect the Beitbridge area, the main route of escape for whites if the situation were to degenerate into chaos and all-out war. In fact the number of men that the SADF sent across the border was closer to 1,000, although some were later withdrawn following protests by Mugabe.

Operation Quartz was apparently based on the assumption that if Mugabe were defeated in the elections it would be necessary to carry out a strike against ZANU to prevent its forces from attempting a coup and taking over the country by force. The plan presupposed a victory by either Nkomo or Muzorewa, or, more likely, a coalition of the two. ZIPRA forces had in fact already begun joint training exercises with the Rhodesian forces, and undoubtedly their leaders had been given an idea of what Op Quartz would entail. Nkomo was not popular with the whites, however, and there was a distinct possibility that the white troops would ignore orders to avoid clashing with ZIPRA.

Although the full details of Operation Quartz have never been made public, some aspects of the plan have been revealed by former members of the security forces. It was divided into two parts: Operation Quartz, an overt strike against the terrorists, and Operation Hectic, a covert strike to kill Mugabe and his key personnel.

The Assembly Points had been agreed on as part of the Lancaster House Agreement and were simply huge camps where thousands of terrorists were congregated. The Rhodesian security forces had been tasked with monitoring the pre-election activities and keeping the peace. Most of the front-line units were therefore already in positions within easy striking distance of the terrorist camps. Attacks on the camps would be preceded by strikes by the Rhodesian Air Force.

The covert part of the plan - Operation Hectic - was to be carried out by the elite troops of the Rhodesian Special Air Service (SAS). 'A' Squadron of the SAS would assassinate Mugabe, while 'B' Squadron would take care of Vice-President Simon Muzenda and the 100-man contingent of ZANLA based in the Medical Arts Centre. 'C' Squadron was designated to take out the 200 ZIPRA and ZANLA men with their commanders (Rex Nhongo, Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Musika) based at the Audio Visual Arts building of the University of Rhodesia. As far as possible, the ZIPRA men would be given an opportunity to escape, and had possibly been informed of the plan beforehand.

The SAS squadrons were to be backed up by tanks and armoured cars of the Rhodesian Armoured Car Regiment, together with a surprise weapon in the form of hitherto undisclosed 106mm recoilless rifles in the Rhodesian armoury.

Eland armoured cars would support 'A' and 'B' Squadrons, while the Rhodesian T-55 tanks would support 'C' Squadron by pounding the Audio Visual Arts building into rubble prior to the attack by the troops. At first it was intended that all eight of the T-55 tanks would be used against the university buildings, but later four of them were sent to Bulawayo to assist the RLI Support Commando in the attack planned for a large Assembly Point in the area.

The tanks were secretly put onto low-loaders and moved to a forward assembly area at the King George VI barracks. Rehearsals with the tanks had taken place at Kibrit barracks, and the planning was thorough and detailed. The tanks would fire approximately 80 high-explosive rounds into the building at point-blank range, after which a single tank would ram the security wall around the university. With

foresight, the troops had even removed the front fenders of the tank concerned, so that debris from the wall would not get caught under them and foul the tracks! This was the command tank and during the preparations the CO was in close contact with SAS Major Bob MacKenzie, whose troops would subsequently enter the building and clear it. Trooper Hughes, who took the unique photos shown here, was loader on this particular tank and he recalls that the tanks were also equipped with spotlights and fully stocked with extra 12.7 and 7.62 ammunition in addition to the main gun load.

The SAS teams would use this breach to storm the building and clear it of terrorists, marking each cleared room with a sheet draped out of the window. The SAS men were well-prepared for their task, equipped with AK-47s, body armour and stun grenades, similar to those used by their British counterparts. The operation would be over before the terrorists were aware of what was happening.

As the voting drew to a close, the troops of the SAS, RLI and Selous Scouts waited eagerly for the code word 'Quartz' to be given. They were impatient to get to grips at last with the enemy that had always used classic guerrilla hit and run tactics. There can be no doubt that if the order had been given the terrorist forces would have been decimated within hours. Their superior numbers would have counted for little in the face of an attack by the small, but highly motivated and effective Rhodesian troops.

The signal was never given.

Three hours beforehand the operation was cancelled and Mugabe was announced as the victor, his men jubilant in the streets of Salisbury, while the Rhodesian troops watched in silence.





Monday March 04, 1980 - 0900hrs. History in the making - opportunity lost? Blakiston-Houston Barracks members of RhACR 'E' Sqn listen to ZRBC election result broadcast - Op Quartz is over, forever.'

The reason for the cancellation of Operation Quartz is not known, but there are several possible explanations.

Lt.Col. Garth Barrett, commanding officer of the SAS, believed that it had been compromised by someone at the upper planning levels who was secretly working for the British. A credible theory as several earlier attempts to kill Mugabe had been seemingly dogged by bad luck - meetings where ambushes had been laid had been cancelled at the last minute and Mugabe narrowly escaped several bomb attempts on his life. Nkomo too, had narrowly escaped a well-planned and executed attempt on his life by the SAS in Zambia. It was almost as if they were being warned beforehand.

Another theory is that the operation was compromised by ZIPRA men who had been informed of the plan, either on purpose or by accident. Their close proximity to the ZANLA forces would have made it difficult for them to keep their own preparations secret for very long.

A third possibility is that once General Walls realised that Mugabe had won the election he cancelled the operation on the grounds that it had been intended only to be implemented if Mugabe were to lose the election and attempt to take power by force.

Walls later claimed in an interview that he had not known of Operation Quartz, but then went on to explain that he had not ordered a coup because it would not have lasted 48 hours in the face of world opposition. Ken Flower, head of the CIO, certainly knew of the plans, since they had been given to him by a Special Branch officer. Interestingly, he made no mention of Op Quartz in his memoirs.

Ian Smith also reportedly told Ian Hancock in an interview in July 1989 that he had spoken to the security force commanders at a meeting in his Salisbury house just prior to the elections, and said that Walls had assured him that Mugabe would not win, but when pressed by Smith, Walls had admitted that there was a contingency plan to stop Mugabe. It seems very unlikely therefore that Walls was unaware of the existence of the Op Quartz plans.

Even after Mugabe's election victory had been announced, troops of the security forces waited in tense anticipation and the situation remained uncertain until Walls went on television that evening and announced that "anybody who gets out of line or for whatever reason starts disobeying the law will be dealt with effectively and swiftly..." This carefully- worded statement signalled the end of any hopes that Operation Quartz might still take place.





Monday March 04, 1980 - 0915hrs - 'Reality bites' - members of RhACR 'E' Sqn. ponder the results of the just announced election results on ZRBC. The realization sinks in. Op Quartz is over - Mugabe the new Prime Minister - ZANU PF the ruling party. Some cry, some laugh, the foreign soldiers plot their escapes - in the background the roar of African soldiers cheering at KG VI Barracks grows louder!

According to the journalist, Pat Scully, details on Op Quartz became public after Mugabe decided to get rid of Peter Walls, following the latter's caustic comments about Mugabe in TV and Press interviews in South Africa. By accusing Walls of having been the mastermind behind the whole plan, Mugabe would be able to dismiss him and at the same time distract public attention from the 'Tekere Affair' (Edgar Tekere, one of Mugabe's cabinet ministers, had been arrested for the murder of an elderly white farmer), which was giving Mugabe a lot of bad publicity abroad at the time.

Nathan Shamuyarira (Minister of Information) therefore accused Walls in the House of Assembly on 15 August of treason and claimed the following:

1. Op Quartz involved a military takeover of the country on 4 March, the day of Mugabe's election victory.
2. ZANLA troops had been purposely massed in assembly points so that the Rhodesian Air Force could take them out en masse.
3. ZIPRA was not to be attacked, in hopes of promoting an alliance between Nkomo and Muzorewa after ZANLA had been neutralised.
4. Op Quartz was cancelled a bare 3 hours before it was due to be launched, because Walls felt that it could not succeed in view of Mugabe's overwhelming victory at the polls.

John Ellison, a 'Daily Express' (London) foreign editor, who originally broke the story, later claimed that the version given by Shamuyarira in the House of Assembly had been deliberately distorted to implicate Walls. Op Quartz, according to Ellison, was simply a contingency plan that had been drawn up 6 weeks earlier and was designed to protect the coalition government (Nkomo-Muzorewa) which many believed would be the outcome of the election. The operation would thus have been carried out, if it proved necessary, in support of a legally elected government.

General Walls flatly denied Shamuyarira's claims, saying he had never heard of Operation Quartz, but Mugabe refused to believe this, demanding that Walls leave the country as soon as possible. Walls had already pointed out to Mugabe that he did not have sufficient control over the 3 ex-terrorist forces, and in an interview in August on SABC-TV predicted that trouble was coming. He was right - three weeks later shoot-outs between ZIPRA and ZANLA started...

The Operation Quartz signals

That Op Quartz was in fact seriously considered by the security forces and that preparations were detailed

and far-advanced at the time of the election is shown by the existence of some of the original signals sent to units of the army. Copies were kept, against orders, by some of the officers, and a number of these originals are now in the possession of the Rhodesian Army Association, which is preparing a history of the war. The following examples were provided by Captain Peter Bray of the RhACR, and are here reproduced exactly, (including typing errors):

[Signal 1](#)

[Signal 2](#)

[Signal 3](#)

The Rhodesian T-55 Tanks

Before 1979 the Rhodesian Army had not possessed any tanks. In October of that year they received eight T-55 tanks from South Africa, confiscated from a French ship, the "Astor", which had been transporting a heavy weapons consignment from Libya for Idi Amin in Uganda. Amin's regime collapsed on the day that the ship docked in Mombasa and it was redirected to Angola. The ship called in to Durban where the cargo, including ten Polish-built T-55LD tanks (built in 1975), was seized, South Africa at that point considering itself to be at war with Angola. Two of the tanks were kept by the South Africans for evaluation. The remaining eight were transported to Rhodesia, together with SADF advisers for the purpose of training Rhodesian crews. The rumour was spread that the tanks had been captured in Mozambique, in order to obscure South Africa's part in the deal. The tanks, now part of the Rhodesian Armoured Car Regiment - in a newly-formed "E" Squadron - were driven around on tank transporters for several months in order to give the impression that the Rhodesians possessed a large number of heavy tanks. On arrival the T-55s had sported the original Libyan camouflage scheme. Major Winkler ordered them repainted in American camo, which was eminently unsuitable, and finally the South African instructors had them painted in anti-infra-red South African camo, which proved perfect for Rhodesian conditions. The tank crews came from 'D' Sqn RhACR, regular force soldiers who had signed on for a minimum of 3 years. Trained crews were vital if the tanks were to be used to maximum effect and it was necessary to ensure that the crews would remain in the Army for some time. A few of the men had tank experience already, but initially there was a lot of experimenting and reliance on the manuals, until Army HQ arranged for proper training by members of the SADF School of Armour.

Command of 'E' Sqn was given to Captain Kaufeldt, an experienced tankerman from West Germany. More recruits from the RLI and Selous Scouts arrived to fill the gaps and acquitted themselves well in their new task.

The Soviet-manufactured radios were removed from the tanks and replaced with the South African radios and headsets used on the Eland 90 AFVs. These used a throat-activated microphone system and were far superior to the Soviet models. In Soviet tanks the radios were operated by the loader, in addition to his task on the main gun. The Rhodesians, reasoning that the loader already had enough to keep him occupied, moved the radios to the tank commander's position. The tank crews were issued with brand-new Soviet AKMS assault rifles and were eager to test them in battle conditions. They were destined to remain unused.

The Rhodesian T55 Tanks



[Original Libyan Camo Scheme](#)



[The American Camo Scheme](#)



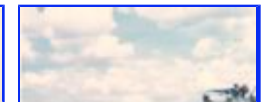
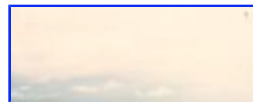
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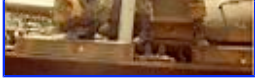


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