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AMERICAN MERCENARIES IN RHODESIA

by Richard Lobban

When foreign nationals with military skills are hired by another nation to fight its own wars the term "mercenaries" is most often used. Mercenaries are also connoted in the expression of "soldier of fortune" or "adventurer" insofar as the decision to serve in another nation's armed service has been taken for personal monetary reward or for less than noble aspirations. Mercenaries have been featured prominently in the southern Sudan, Biafra, Oman, Zaire, Angola, and elsewhere in recent years. The assistance of mercenaries is necessitated when a local authority can find neither the local manpower nor the mass support for carrying out military operations. Consequently, mercenaries are very frequently associated with supporting regimes which are politically isolated within their own national borders.

In rather well documented literature¹ the United States' Central Intelligence Agency hired significant numbers of American and British nationals, to mention only the most important, to fight against the victorious Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. It happens that a similar pattern of recruitment is now underway in Rhodesia although this has not received much attention in the Western press. It should not be surprising that the recruitment is underground as the United States Federal Code, Title 18, Sections 958, 959, and 960 expressly prohibit recruitment and enlistment of American citizens in foreign armed forces. Various fines and periods of imprisonment are proscribed by these three sections of the Code. In attempting to ascertain the official American foreign policy on this matter, the following letter, to Senator Pell of the Foreign Relations Committee, is most informative:

April 28, 1977

Dear Senator Pell:

I am writing in response to your letter of April 5 in which you requested information about a report reaching you of the presence of

some 400 American mercenaries serving in the army of the illegal regime of Southern Rhodesia.

You are no doubt aware that any Americans serving in the Rhodesian forces are not on assignment from the U.S. armed forces. The United States is providing no support whatever to the white minority regime in Rhodesia. On the contrary, we are strictly enforcing United Nations sanctions against that regime, and for many months have been engaged in an intensive diplomatic effort to promote a peaceful settlement there based on majority rule. We have of course seen press reports of several hundred American mercenaries in Rhodesia, but do not have information to substantiate them.

Under U.S. law, it is a criminal offense for any person within the United States to recruit a U.S. citizen for service as a soldier in foreign armed forces, or for a U.S. citizen to enlist within the U.S. for such service. It is our practice to make this law known in order to discourage possible violation of it. In the event that there is evidence that such recruitment is taking place within the United States, the U.S. Government will move vigorously to investigate, and where the evidence is adequate, to prosecute. Whenever reports of possible recruitment come to the attention of the Department of State, we refer them to the Department of Justice for investigation.

Sincerely,

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for
Congressional Relations

To the best of my knowledge there is not a single case of any American having been prosecuted under this Code for having served anywhere in post-colonial Africa even though thousands of Americans have served in capacities which are in clear violation of the Federal law.

In Rhodesia the greatest number of mercenaries is from the United Kingdom, but the second largest number comes from the United States. During the Angolan recruitment, it appears that the CIA provided at least \$20 million dollars for the recruitment of British mercenaries² and it would not be unreasonable to presume that similar financing is continuing since there has been no formal curtailment of such financing. In the Rhodesian recruitment drive other nationalities are also represented such as: Spanish, Australian, Canadian, Portuguese, South Africans, Germans, Greeks, Dutch, French, and Swedish. Even one mercenary has been reported from Sri Lanka. For this essay the focus will be only on American mercenaries in Rhodesia with the understanding that the pattern and presumably the funding of the mercenaries are effectively parallel, that is, the para-legal "intelligence" organizations of the Western capitalist nations are backing this effort to sustain the white minority regime of Ian Smith which would have collapsed long ago without this foreign assistance. This essay will also overlook the considerable number of ways that United Nations sanctions are violated by these same nations — even the United States — which just recently returned to the ban against

Rhodesian chrome but still has significant banking links, ties in the major energy industries, hotels, and car rentals, not to mention the military aircraft manufactured under American license but exported from France and Italy.³ Indeed, it should be clear that the question of mercenaries is only a portion of the covert Western aid for settler colonialism and white supremacy despite the excellent cosmetic job done by President Jimmy Carter and by Ambassador Andrew Young.

Despite moderately high pay, the lot of the mercenary is not really very good, apart from the chance of meeting one's death in a foreign battlefield. If one might identify the typical mercenary from the United States, he (there are no reports of women) would likely be an unemployed Vietnam veteran with combat experience in counter-insurgency, but frequently with personal or emotional problems which have made life in the United States difficult. It is not uncommon to find a political orientation which is ultra-right, with aspects of racial paranoia rather frequent. For American mercenaries in Angola there was also the problem of not being paid, the possibility of desertion, some chance of execution by fellow mercenaries, and in some other instances capture and execution by the purported enemy.

Mercenary recruitment has been openly carried out in a half dozen American magazines including *Shotgun News*, *Gun Week*, *Sports Afield*, *Shooting Times*, and *Guns Magazine*.⁴ But it is also common to learn about serving in Rhodesia through individually addressed letters or through word-of-mouth. Recruitment is most often for the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) but may also include service in the Rhodesian police, the Special Air Service, or in an elite commando group, presumably something like the infamous Selous Scouts.⁵ Other recruitment has been done directly through the United States military, albeit unofficial and fiercely denied. Examples of this may be seen with the "Phoenix Associates" recruitment of US Marines at Quantico, Virginia⁶ and with the Chairman of the Department of Military Science at the University of California at Berkeley.⁷

If any serious investigations have taken place there have yet to be any prosecutions of either recruiters or of those who have been publicly identified as mercenaries. *Shotgun News* suggests that one contact Frank Abbott Sweeney in Tenafly, New Jersey if one would like to serve in the Rhodesian Light Infantry as he did for three years.⁸ The Columbia Broadcasting System featured an interview with an American mercenary on the evening news on July 22, 1976 but nothing has come of this either.⁹ An organization known as "Anubis Ltd." of Highlands, Texas has published advertisements in *Shotgun News* but with no known prosecutions;¹⁰ and Frank Renzi of Long Beach, California has placed recruitment ads in *Shooting Times* and *Sports Afield*.¹¹ In another case, former U.S. Special Forces Major Robert K. Brown of Arvada, Colorado organized his own recruitment organization including a glossy magazine called "Soldier of Fortune" (a journal for professional adventurers) in which he gave a recruitment contact in Salisbury, Rhodesia.¹²

For those who actually reach Rhodesia the typical case would be an arrival on a tourist visa in Salisbury¹³ where one seeks Rhodesian Major Nick Lamprecht¹⁴ at the King George VI Barracks which is the central recruiting office. In order to cover the mercenary stigma, American recruits may be termed "volunteers" or "emigrants" which is ironic in a nation which now has a net out-migration. The rate of pay is determined on the basis of experience and former rank in the United States military; wages have been reported as low as \$800 a month¹⁵ to \$3,000 a month¹⁶ for high ranking officers.

In the summer of 1975 the first known American mercenary was killed in action in Rhodesia as a member of the Rhodesian Light Infantry. John Coey of Hideaway Hills, Ohio had originally joined the Special Air Services in March 1972 and for official purposes said he had emigrated to Rhodesia but then was drafted. The State Department responded to this situation by saying "we can discourage them but can't prohibit them"¹⁷ even though Americans had long been prohibited from visiting Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea, and other countries. Two other Americans, Joe Belisario and Craig Acheson, were arrested in neighboring Botswana allegedly on a mission for the Rhodesian secret police. Both of these men were leaders in the hysterical anti-Communist formation known as "Veterans and Volunteers for Vietnam."¹⁸

By July 1976 some news reports suggested that only a few dozen Americans were serving in the Rhodesian military or police.¹⁹ However a BBC program indicated that 80 percent of the newest recruits were foreigners and were mostly British, American, German, and South African. The BBC program suggested that there was an international recruitment network. Rhodesian Major Nick Lamprecht denied this claim.²⁰ By the end of 1976 Robin Wright, a free-lance journalist covering southern Africa, said that there were 400 Americans already enlisted and that applications and inquiries were increasing daily. A Major from Texas said that most had joined in the previous six months,²¹ a period when the Rhodesian military situation worsened drastically. The *London Sunday Times* estimated that the total mercenary force had reached 800 and that there were five applications each day.²² A larger estimate appeared in the African press which counted 1,400 mercenaries, representing a significant portion of the entire Rhodesian troop strength and including soldiers from New York and Tucson, Arizona.²³

Even though a recruitment program was actively underway, the attacks by the liberation movements were having a very demoralizing effect on some of these soldiers of fortune. For example, Lawrence Meyers deserted to Gaberone, Botswana saying that the nationalists will win in Rhodesia.²⁴ After a little more than a month Meyers was deported²⁵ and returned to the United States.²⁶ Although the FBI is reported to have begun an investigation, Meyers has been granted immunity from prosecution. Since Meyers has admitted that he served as a mercenary in violation of U.S. law this may be odd, but another explanation is possible. It seems that David Bufkin, a known mercenary recruiter of the CIA (as

revealed in testimony in the U.S. House of Representatives)²⁷ had been given a special assignment to spy on the Cubans at their Embassy in Montreal. This unusual task emerged because it was believed by the CIA that the Cubans were seeking to train some mercenaries to infiltrate the Rhodesian military. One of Bufkin's jobs was to eavesdrop on the Cubans and break this possible network. Those who had been recruited by the Cubans were reported to have deserted to Botswana.²⁸ Is it possible that Meyers was a Cuban recruit, or was it perhaps the group of three American mercenaries that stole a Piper Cherokee plane from the Salisbury Prince Charles Airport in February 1977?²⁹ Two of these three deserters were in the Rhodesian Light-Infantry while the other had served in the Rhodesian air cavalry unit. In any case, Meyers has testified that Lt. Col. Monte Bulland at the University of California had recruited him with the promise that there would be no problem to go to Rhodesia with the "help from friends in Washington." Bulland, who served as an intelligence officer in political warfare, has denied Meyers charges.³⁰

This sort of intrigue notwithstanding, the recruitment effort continues. An advertisement in the Fresno (California) Bee describes "high risk" military work in Africa, although this might be recruitment for southern Zaire as well as for Rhodesia.³¹ Another death was that of George William Clarke, 28, of Lemon Grove, California on May 15, 1977. Clarke was the second American officially reported killed in action in Rhodesia. This former US Marine and Vietnam veteran was given full Rhodesian military honors and his coffin was carried by eight other US citizens serving in the Rhodesian Light-Infantry.³²

In September 1977, the American, S. Drevitts, 25, was reported as a deserter and he claimed that many others had already left "because they do not want to die for a futile cause."³³ November 1977 saw the return of Keith Nelson, 26, a Vietnam, Special Forces veteran from Sycamore, Illinois. Nelson had lost both of his legs on military patrol in June 1977 in Rhodesia.³⁴ The same article which described Nelson's mishap also noted a Major Mike Williams, 52, of San Antonio, Texas who was once a Special Forces Captain in Vietnam and had served in the U.S. Army for 12 years. During 1977 Major Williams was the commanding officer of the Rhodesian Grey Scouts, an elite horse-mounted infantry unit which specialized in counter-insurgency activities. On an American speaking tour Nelson's engagements were arranged by the staunch anti-communist American Security Council. Nelson said that he went to Rhodesia because he loved military adventure and that he had participated on raids into neighboring Mozambique.³⁵

With such open and public documentation as can be gleaned from the national and international press one wonders how the Department of State and the Department of Justice have failed to investigate "vigorously" and "prosecute" men who are openly violating U.S. law. One is forced to conclude that the presence of American mercenaries in Rhodesia is simply an unacknowledged portion of the American foreign policy for that nation.

FOOTNOTES

1. A.H. Thobhani, "The Mercenary Menace" *Africa Today* 23 (1976), pp. 61-68.
2. *Washington Post*, February 1, 1976.
3. M.T. Klare, "U.S. Arms Deliveries to South Africa," Institute for Policy Studies (February 1977).
4. David Anable, "The Return of the Mercenaries," *Africa Report* 20 (1975), pp. 2-6.
5. Thobhani, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
6. *New York Times*, June 22, 1975.
7. *Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 1977.
8. Anable, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
9. Thobhani, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
10. Anable, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Anable, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
13. *Daily News* (Tanzania), December 21, 1976.
14. *International Herald Tribune*, July 23, 1976.
15. *The Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 1977.
16. *The Sun*, July 18, 1976.
17. Anable, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
18. Anable, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.
19. *The Sun*, July 18, 1976.
20. *Zambia Daily Mail*, July 20, 1976; *International Herald Tribune*, July 23, 1976.
21. *International Herald Tribune*, December 10, 1976.
22. *London Sunday Times* (U.K.), November 28, 1976.
23. *Daily News* (Tanzania), December 21, 1976.
24. *International Herald Tribune*, January 10, 1977.
25. *The Star Weekly* (South Africa), February 12, 1977.
26. *The Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 1977.
27. *International Herald Tribune*, January 12, 1977.
28. *New York Times*, January 11, 1977.
29. *Times of Zambia*, February 20, 1977.
30. *The Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 1977.

31. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 1977.
32. UPI, May 26, 1977.
33. *Times of Zambia*, September 8, 1977.
34. *Providence Sunday Journal*, November 20, 1977.
35. *Chicago Daily News*, December 8, 1977.

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