

= 7 Independent Company (Rhodesia) =

7 Independent Company (7 Indep Coy ; French : 7ème Compagnie indépendante) was a short @-@ lived company of francophone volunteers in the Rhodesian Army during the Rhodesian Bush War . Numbering about 200 men at its peak , it was unique in the history of the Rhodesian Army as an exclusively expatriate unit . It existed between November 1977 and May 1978 as a company in the 1st Battalion , the Rhodesia Regiment , and served two counter @-@ insurgency tours on Operation Hurricane in north @-@ eastern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) .

During the Bush War , the Rhodesian Army augmented its ranks with foreign volunteers , who were accepted into regular regiments with the same pay and conditions of service as locals . Most foreign recruits enlisted in the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) , which launched an overseas recruitment programme in 1974 , but required successful applicants to speak good English . The Army attempted to alleviate the strain on its troops during late 1977 by recruiting French @-@ speakers as well , and formed a designated company in the Rhodesia Regiment for them . The regiment already had six independent companies , so the francophone unit became 7 Independent Company .

The company 's men , a mixture of former French paratroopers , ex @-@ Foreign Legionnaires and young adventurers , had trouble from the start integrating with the Rhodesian forces , and became unsettled by the respective ranks they were given in the Rhodesian Army . In an attempt to raise their morale and create a strong esprit de corps , the Army issued them beret insignias backed with the French tricolour and allowed them to raise the flag of France alongside that of Rhodesia each morning . Apparently under the impression that they had signed up as highly paid mercenaries , many of the French troopers returned home after their first bush trip , unhappy to have received no more money than a regular Rhodesian soldier .

On operations their performance was generally below par , but the Frenchmen were involved in some successful actions during February and early March 1978 . Their oppressive treatment of the black villagers they encountered made them very unpopular in the operational area . The Rhodesians quickly deemed the experiment a failure and following a series of disasters for the company during the latter part of its second tour , including two friendly fire incidents and several fatalities , it was disbanded in May 1978 . Forces led by one of its members , Bob Denard , later that month executed a coup d 'état in the Comoros with French , Rhodesian and South African governmental support .

= = Background = =

Following a dispute with the British government regarding terms for the granting of full independence , the predominantly white minority government of the self @-@ governing colony of Rhodesia (or Southern Rhodesia) , led by Ian Smith , unilaterally declared independence on 11 November 1965 . Britain and the United Nations refused to recognise this and each imposed economic sanctions on Rhodesia . Meanwhile , the country 's two most prominent communist @-@ backed black nationalist groups , the Zimbabwe African National Union and the Zimbabwe African People 's Union , mobilised their respective guerrilla armies , the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People 's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) , for what they called the " Second Chimurenga " , with the goal of overthrowing the government and introducing black majority rule .

The Rhodesian Bush War was the result , beginning in earnest on 21 December 1972 when ZANLA attacked Altena and Whistlefield Farms near Centenary in the country 's north @-@ east . The Rhodesian Security Forces launched Operation Hurricane in response and fought back strongly , reducing the number of guerrillas active within the country to under 300 by December 1974 . In the period October ? November 1974 , they killed more nationalist fighters than in the previous two years combined . However , a South African @-@ brokered ceasefire , which the security forces respected and the insurgents ignored , helped the nationalists to win back ground . By 1977 there were 2 @,@ 500 guerrillas operating in Rhodesia , with several times that number in training abroad

The Rhodesian Army , though mostly made up of local men , also included some foreign volunteers , who were integrated into regular units under the same salary and conditions of service . Almost all of the foreigners served in the Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) , a heliborne commando battalion with a glamorous international reputation . The RLI initiated a major overseas recruitment drive in 1974 , targeting potential volunteers from Europe , Oceania and the Americas , and requiring successful applicants to speak good English . This campaign was bearing considerable fruit by May 1976 , when the RLI 's largest ever intake included more foreign volunteers than any before , and the enlisting of men from overseas into the RLI would increase yet further . By 1977 - 78 there were around 1 000 foreigners in the Rhodesian forces . However , the Rhodesian Army remained stretched and low on manpower .

= = Formation and training = =

The idea for a francophone unit came from a French national , François Cramer , who had business interests and connections in Rhodesia . He proposed it to Major General Sandy MacLean , then the Rhodesian Army 's second in command , while they were visiting France together . MacLean relayed the idea to the General Staff in Salisbury , which decided in late 1977 to form a " French battalion " to alleviate the strain on its regular units . A Rhodesian officer of French extraction , Cyril Bernard , warned his superiors strongly against the scheme , but was ultimately himself sent to France to start the project . On the way he stopped in Zurich , Switzerland , where MacLean gave him final approval for the operation and a budget of US \$ 30 000 . They resolved to recruit mainly in Paris and Lyon . Bernard then entered France and renewed old connections from the French military academy at Saint Cyr .

Recruitment was carried out by a former French paratrooper , Roger Bruni , operating from an apartment on Rue Bachaumont in central Paris . Advertisements , placed in newspapers such as France Soir , offered " a job with a future abroad ... minimum age 22 , former non commissioned officers preferred " . The body of men eventually assembled varied widely in terms of age , background and experience , but was based largely around ex paratroopers and former Foreign Legionnaires . The average age was about 25 . French speaking veterans of an assortment of African and Middle Eastern conflicts spanning the previous two decades successfully applied , but past service did not prove a necessity ; some of the men accepted had no military experience . Most of them spoke English only at a basic level if at all .

Once signed up , each man was instructed to travel to Switzerland , where appropriate visas were swiftly procured from the South African Embassy . In early November 1977 , the French recruits flew from Zurich to Johannesburg on a South African Airways liner , then to Salisbury by Air Rhodesia . Already in Rhodesia waiting for the men were their leaders : Major Roland de l'Assomption , an ex officer of the French Army 's crack 11th Shock Parachute Regiment , and a former officer of the Gabonese President Omar Bongo 's guard ; and Major Mario La Viola , once a non commissioned officer in the Foreign Legion 's 2nd Parachute Regiment . Beneath them were the Antillean Captain Toumi , who became the first black officer in the regular Rhodesian Army as the unit 's second in command , and " Colonel " Bob Denard , an infamous French soldier of fortune nicknamed le chien de guerre ? " the dog of war " .

According to an anonymous veteran of the unit , it mostly comprised recently discharged servicemen from the French forces who were having trouble adapting to civilian life . " They didn 't know how to do anything else , only how to jump with a parachute and obey orders , " he explained , " and they liked that kind of thing . " Others , he said , were members of the political far right who had joined up " to kill commies and blacks " , and some were criminals hoping to escape the attention of the French police . Each signed on for two years . The French speaking unit was placed in the Rhodesia Regiment (RR) as an " independent company " . The RR already had six of these (made up of Rhodesians) , so the Frenchmen became 7 Independent Company .

The Rhodesian Army sought to forge a strong esprit de corps among the new recruits , and to this end extended them several sentimental allowances : for example , morale amongst the Frenchmen

rose when they were informed that the Rhodesian insignia on their berets would be backed with the French tricolour . In a similar vein , their request for permission to raise the flag of France alongside that of Rhodesia outside their headquarters each morning was approved . French @-@ speaking men already in the army were attached to the unit to act as interpreters and assist with coordination and tactical instruction . Some of these were Mauritians , who by virtue of their upbringing spoke both English and French at a native @-@ like level . The company itself , which numbered about 200 men , was assigned headquarters near Salisbury at Cranborne Barracks , the home of the Rhodesian Light Infantry . It was organised in the same manner as a standard Rhodesian independent company , the only exception being its exclusively francophone personnel .

Spirits were high during the unit 's brief training period as the men enjoyed playing sports , observing the country scenery and experiencing the night @-@ life of the nearby capital . They were not adequately trained , receiving only a basic medical examination , a few days ' fitness training and a cursory explanation of proper conduct in the bush . They expressed surprise when instructed to paint stripes of camouflage green on their weapons and combat boots in the Rhodesian fashion , having never before heard of such a practice .

The first dent to morale came after about a week when the volunteers were first issued ranks in the Rhodesian Army . In the eyes of some of the French @-@ speaking soldiers , the ranks assigned appeared to have been chosen almost at random by their superiors , and did not reflect their actual respective levels of training , ability and experience . Some men who considered themselves to have been overlooked began to have problems with discipline . The brazen attitude of most of the company 's soldiers jarred strongly with that of their Rhodesian commanders , who had high standards regarding presentation and dress which many of the Frenchmen had little inclination to meet .

= = Service = =

= = = First bush trip = = =

The francophone company was first deployed out of its barracks in late November 1977 , when it was sent to Bindura , about 88 kilometres (55 mi) north @-@ east from Salisbury , for a few days in the bush on Operation Hurricane , the Army 's operational area which covered Rhodesia 's north @-@ east against guerrilla activity . After this passed without major incident , the Frenchmen were despatched to Rusambo , a camp in the Chimanda Tribal Trust Lands , near Rushinga , about 250 kilometres (160 mi) north @-@ east from the capital and less than 20 kilometres (12 mi) from the border with Mozambique . Most insurgents in this area belonged to ZANLA .

A company of men from the Territorial Force was already stationed at Rusambo , advised by a team of intelligence officers . " Sticks " of four men (three FN FAL riflemen and an MAG gunner) would be sent out into the bush from Rusambo for periods of up to two weeks , equipped with a radio to communicate with the base . Their task while in action was to seek out guerrillas by means of patrolling , ambushing and operating observation and listening posts . Once a group of insurgents was spotted , the stick leader would report their positions ; Rusambo would then alert the Army and request a Fireforce . If Fireforce were available , it would arrive and engage the cadres ; if not , the stick in the field would have to handle the situation itself .

At first , men from 7 Independent Company were sent out in sticks mixed with the Territorials , but problems soon arose regarding proper regimen and the language barrier . When the Frenchmen were then sent out alone , their Land Rovers prominently flying the French flag , the issue of language was resolved , but that of indiscipline remained . Though discretion was paramount if they were to observe enemy movements covertly and effectively , the men of 7 Independent Company were found to have difficulty maintaining this and sometimes made careless mistakes which risked revealing their presence . Moreover , when investigations were made of local kraals , marked tension soon arose between the Frenchmen and the local black population ; the soldiers ' ignorance of English or Shona made it very difficult for discussions to take place and , according to other

Rhodesian units who came into contact with them , the French soldiers took out their frustration on the villagers , often using excessive force in their attempted interrogations . Nyamahoboko Police Station received a report of a 7 Independent Company man raping a young tribeswoman in a dense thicket , but did not act on it . According to one history of the Rhodesia Regiment , " it was indicated that the Frenchmen had received instruction that all black people were to be regarded as terrorists " .

The Rhodesian Army quickly deemed the French experiment a failure . It reassigned 7 Independent Company in late November to Marymount Mission , a small settlement to the east of Rusambo where there was a minor police station . The number of patrols they would embark on was reduced . Two of the company 's vehicles were ambushed by cadres between Marymount and Rusambo on 6 January 1978 , resulting in two men being injured , one fatally so . A week later another truck was surprised on the same bush road , resulting in one death and three serious casualties . The company was brought back from the bush four days later for rest and recuperation (R & R) in Salisbury .

= = = Strike = = =

During their 15 @-@ day rest periods the company 's men congregated around the Belgian @-@ owned Elizabeth Hotel , in the centre of the city at the corner of Causeway and Manica Road . Many of them became seriously disaffected when they first received their salary from the Rhodesian Army . Having apparently been misled about wages of up to R \$ 1 @,@ 000 per month (? 7 @,@ 000) by the French recruiters , they were surprised to find that their basic monthly pay was actually R \$ 245 (? 1 @,@ 800) , the same as a regular Rhodesian soldier . Moreover , some were upset that they had been paid in Rhodesian dollars , which because of the country 's international isolation could not easily be exchanged for foreign currencies . Although it was not as much as they had been expecting , one disenchanted veteran of the unit afterwards admitted that the tax @-@ exempt R \$ 245 wage , which came with a \$ 10 special @-@ unit supplement , was still more than enough money for them to live comfortably in Salisbury during their time off .

The pay dispute split the unit . About two thirds went on strike , saying they would not return to action unless the Army upped their wages and paid them in foreign currency . Meanwhile , some of the more contented Frenchmen made steps to remain permanently , buying cars and having their wives join them in Salisbury . The Army detained the strike 's ringleaders for insubordination . With neither side willing to budge ? the Army refused to give the strikers extra pay or special treatment , saying this would contravene Rhodesia 's policy not to engage mercenaries ? the disaffected men were repatriated to France at their own request . The Rhodesian Army considered disbanding the unit altogether , but persevered when Major de l 'Assomption convinced his superiors that his remaining men were still loyal and eager to continue serving .

= = = Second bush trip ; dissolution = = =

Starting on 11 February 1978 , 7 Independent Company spent half a week at Mount Darwin , where there was a major Army base . The company acquitted themselves well during this time , but one of their number was badly injured in a motor accident . They returned to Rusambo , where the camp was now manned by the British South Africa Police (BSAP) , Criminal Investigation Department and Special Branch , guarded by a group of Coloured and Indian @-@ Rhodesian soldiers . On 26 February , the Frenchmen spotted a group of seven cadres indoctrinating tribespeople at a local kraal , and called up Fireforce . The RLI men who arrived killed four of the seven , including one carrying detailed documents . The next day 7 Independent Company observed 11 guerrillas entering another kraal , but this time the Fireforce took too long to arrive . The French company took part in a large contact on 1 March , fighting alongside an RLI Fireforce against 28 cadres ; 18 insurgents were killed in this contact without loss for the Rhodesian Army .

Soon after this , two sticks from 7 Independent Company were despatched to Marymount , led by a deputy intelligence officer who began sending them out on more regular night patrols . The following

months were a disaster for the locally based Rhodesian forces ; first one stick fired on another , causing an injury , then a BSAP Land Rover hit a mine , killing two members of the French company . A further Frenchman died in an ambush by insurgents before another friendly fire incident on 19 April 1978 resulted in a fatality . On several occasions during this bush trip the area was " frozen " ; regular army units were confined to their camps while the Selous Scouts operated against the guerrillas . With morale amongst the Frenchmen plummeting , bringing their unit close to collapse , its officers at Rusambo frantically worked to keep it together . The company did not last much longer once back in Salisbury for R & R. Soon after three of its troopers were placed in detention at Llewellyn Barracks , the unit was formally dissolved in May 1978 . The only personnel retained by the Army were the interpreters , who were returned to their former units .

= = Legacy = =

Supported by the French , Rhodesian and South African governments and with Rhodesian logistical assistance , forces led by Denard took part in a coup d'état in the Comoros later in May , toppling Ali Soilih (who Denard had himself put into power three years earlier) . The Comoros subsequently became a key location for Rhodesian " sanction @-@ busting " operations , providing a convenient end @-@ user certificate for clandestine shipments of weapons and equipment bound for Rhodesia in spite of the UN embargo . South Africa , also under a UN arms boycott because of apartheid , received war materiel through the Comoros in a similar fashion .

Some 7 Independent Company men became civilians in Rhodesia , which was reconstituted as Zimbabwe in 1980 . Two of them , Gervais Henri Alfred Boutanquoi and Simon Marc Chemouil (both former Foreign Legionnaires) , were executed in April 1983 , despite a late plea from French authorities for clemency , having been found guilty of robbing and murdering Richard Kraft , a Karoi café owner . Witness Mangwende , the Zimbabwean Minister of Foreign Affairs , issued a statement clarifying that the execution was for the murder and unrelated to their earlier " service as mercenaries during the time of the Smith regime . "