

Rhodesia's First Dakota

by Dave Newnham



A line-up of SRAF aircraft (SR25 closest to the camera).
COs inspection in 1948.

An aircraft that has a special place in the hearts of the Rhodesian Air Force! The first Dakota to fly regularly in Rhodesian skies! This Douglas C-47A, Manufacturers Serial Number 13865/25310, more commonly known as the “Dakota” in Britain and all the commonwealth countries and colonies that flew it.

Built by the Douglas Aircraft Company in 1943/4 and allocated the United States Army Air Corps serial 43-48049. It was built as part of a Lend/Lease contract for the Royal Air Force.

Allotted the UK serial KG766, it was delivered to the Royal Air Force at Nassau on the 24-Jul-44. It was not to remain with the Royal Air Force for long as it was part of a batch destined to be handed over to the South African Air Force. It was delivered to the South African Air Force and became SAAF6842 on 12-Aug-44.

The Southern Rhodesia Air Force had been absorbed into the RAF in Apr-40 when No. 1 Squadron SRAF became No. 237 Squadron RAF. After the conclusion of the Second World War Rhodesian airmen were demobilized upon their return home. Rhodesia did not, therefore, possess an air force in the immediate post war years. The only military flying in the country was that undertaken by the Rhodesian Air Training Group of the Royal Air Force which, starting in 1940, continued to train RAF aircrew until 1954.

After the war, the military units of Rhodesia comprised the Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps (regular staff for the training of the territorial force) and the Kings African Rifles, an infantry regiment. Places were found in the staff corps for ex-airmen; and although without any form of official backing, these enthusiasts set about building an ‘Air Force’ from scratch. “Scavenging” was the order of the day (since there was virtually no money allocated to the air force) and soon Rhodesian businesses and owners of any property likely to be useful to the 'Air Force', had cause to view air force personnel with suspicion!

In 1946, a Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps communications flight was organised and known as the "Communications Flight" but had no regular establishment. The aircraft it used were gifted from RATG or taken over from the dissolving Southern Rhodesia Air Services (the government organisation that had impressed all Rhodesian civil aircraft at the beginning of the war). The flight comprised a de Havilland Leopard Moth, an Avro Anson and two de Havilland Dragon Rapides.

Then; on the 28-Nov-47 the Southern Rhodesia Government re-established the Southern Rhodesia Air Force as a permanent unit. Because of the shortage of funds, Tiger Moths were acquired from RATG scrap dumps and re-built. Enough money was raised to purchase two N.A. Harvards from South Africa and RATG also donated Harvards and Tiger Moths to the new force. Thus was a new air force created.

The 'enthusiasts' had been building up the 'Air Force' for some time, before the official authorisation, and on the 12-Nov-47 our Dakota joined the 'SRAF' and was serialled SR25.

It had been donated to the SRAF by, the then South African Prime Minister, General Jan Smuts, as a personal gift! This was a significant event as it was the first modern and large cargo aircraft to be owned by the air force. It was modern in design and construction and large by the standards of the day. Prior to its arrival the largest aircraft in the force's inventory had been the de Havilland Dragon Rapide, a 1930s seven-seater bi-plane! Our Dak, now started its career with the Rhodesian Air Forces and was the first Dakota to regularly fly in Rhodesia.



Although of poor quality, this photo shows SR25 about to depart for UK on the first Spitfire Ferry. Note the SRAF roundel and bar markings.

In 1951 it transported pilots and ground crew from Rhodesia to Britain, to fly the first and second Spitfire ferries from UK to Rhodesia (the air force's first acquisition of something approaching a "modern" military aircraft).

On the 1-Sep-53, the SRAF was re-named the Rhodesian Air Force, upon the creation of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. And in Dec-53 the Dakotas in service were allotted new serials starting at '151' although retaining their 'SR' prefix. SR25 should have become SR151, however, it is understood that because of the fondness with which the aircraft was regarded, it retained its serial SR25 and serial SR151 was never worn on this or any other aircraft.

Thus matters stood until Oct-54 when the the Queen conferred the title "Royal" upon the air force. The air force became the Royal Rhodesian Air Force and all aircraft serials were adjusted to reflect

the change. SR25 became RRAF25! In Mar-62 there was a major shake-up of the air force serial system and once again all aircraft were re-numbered, our Dak, RRAF25 becoming RRAF702.

But the serial changes were not over yet! In Dec-63 the Federation was dissolved and the air force reverted to Southern Rhodesian control. Air force aircraft remained marked with RRAF serials until Mar-68 when a gradual change began; to place a “Rhodesian” serial on air force aircraft. RRAF702 became R3702! This was the ‘Base Number System’ in which the squadron number (in this case 3) was placed in a rotating sequence within the numerical portion of the serial.



A typical RRAF Dakota, at Salisbury International (c.1959). (via Dave Newnham)

Finally, in 1970, Rhodesia became a republic and the force formally dropped the title “Royal” to become the Rhodesian Air Force. R3702 was allocated the radio call-sign VPYZA from 15-Mar-70 but its serial markings did not change.

From the early 1970s the “Bush War” in Rhodesia ‘ramped up’ as terrorists attempted to move, in ever greater numbers, into the country in an attempt to take control. One must appreciate that the size of the country is something like five times that of the UK and to cover such a vast area the Rhodesian answer was to divide their forces up into mobile “Fire Forces”. These Fire Forces consisted of approximately a company of infantry and an air component of a Dakota, a light attack aircraft, a helicopter command/gunship and three or four troop carrying helicopters. They were based at Forward Airfields, close to the operational areas.



Rhodesian Dakotas dropping paratroops in the 1970s.
This is a training drop.

The Fire Forces responded to sightings of CT groups. The troop carrying helicopters deployed their troops in an assault and the Dakota's job was to drop paratroops in a stop line to prevent the enemy from escaping! This was the operational task of the Dakotas.

However, they were also heavily involved in re-supply to the forward areas. And there were always communications duties and strategic movement of large numbers of troops and large amounts of cargo to 'keep the war going'. Rhodesian Dakotas worked hard for their living!



Hard, 'sweaty' work under a hot sun.
Loading drummed fuel to supply a FAF.
(Dave Newnham via RhAF)

R3702 conducted its fair share of such activities but in 1974 it was given an equipment upgrade and took on a specialist task. This was as an ELINT aircraft. Electronic Intelligence involves the listening to and gathering of data about the enemy's radio and radar installations. Jamming enemy radio and radar communications is also part of the remit. Our R3702 carried out many ELINT missions but that didn't stop it being used as a troop transport/paratroop aircraft when needed.

Late in the war the threat posed by ground-to-air, heat-seeking missiles such as the SAM-7 'Strella' became substantial. Rhodesian Dakotas had a modification installed to diffuse the hot exhaust gasses from the engines and thus reduce their 'heat signature' and susceptibility to missile "lock-on".



The Rhodesian
'Strella' Mod.
(RhAF via Dave
Newnham)

When the Rhodesians mounted 'external' operations, it was often the case of almost everything being committed. Such was the situation in May-77 when R3702 took part in Operation Aztec. It had landed at Mapai in Mozambique on a re-supply mission. Having delivered its load; on 31-May-77, as it accelerated during its take-off run; an RPG.7 (shoulder-launched anti-tank missile) fired by a terrorist, hit the aircraft and it was destroyed. The crew, except for the co-pilot, Flight Lieutenant Bruce Collocott (KIA) escaped serious injury. I am particularly saddened by this episode since Bruce and I had been at school together.

Postscript

Although this completes the story of Rhodesia's first Dakota, I cannot resist finishing with a final, amusing, Rhodesian Dakota story. This occurred after Zimbabwean independence on the 18-Dec-80. Flight Lieutenant "Spider" Webb was given the task of taking a Dakota on a test flight after it had come out of major servicing. On the first test flight he had an engine problem and returned the aircraft to the technicians for rectification.

Having been airborne for about twenty minutes on the second test flight, the problem re-occurred but of a much more serious nature. He had no choice but to make a forced-landing, before he lost all power to the engines. The ground below was not suitable for even a 'wheels-up' landing, and spying a farm dam he decided that the best option was to put it down on the water!



The 'ditched' Dak. The discoloured trails are fuel leaking from the tanks.
(RhAF via Dave Newnham)

One should remember that Rhodesia is a land-locked country and at its closest approach, even the border is some 400 miles from the sea! The “ditching” was successful and the aircraft was in due course recovered. However, you can imagine the hilarity with which his action was greeted! One does not easily live down a reputation as the only Rhodesian to “ditch a Dak”!