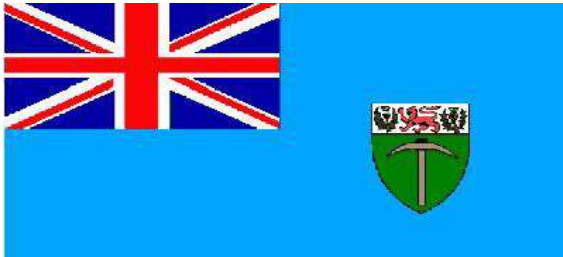


# The Nine A.M. Air Force

The Rhodesian Air Force 1935-1980  
by Dave Newnham



United Kingdom flag



Southern Rhodesian Flag  
Rhodesian Flag

## Introduction

In the early days, especially pre-World War II, when aircraft were not as robust as they are today; it was the general practice in Rhodesia for the 'military' to fly from early morning until the middle of the day and thus avoid the heat of the day and the attendant thermals and 'Bumps'. At Thornhill this practice continued right up to 1980, with the station working hours being 0600 to 1300. It also struck me when writing this article, that the Air Force has been known by nine different names; enumerated below.

Although a relatively short lived force, by world standards, the Air Force of Rhodesia made its mark and RAF Chief of Air Staff, Sir Charles Elworthy called it "The most cost effective Air Force in the Commonwealth". It underwent several changes of name and organisation. Herewith, in chronological order; an outline of the service under each name by which it has been known. This summary will assist in the understanding of the aircraft serials listing. Notes on the serials listing are shown at the end of this text and cross-referenced to the table.

## Rhodesia Regiment Air Section

Aviation in Rhodesia started in 1920 with the arrival of the "Silver Queen II", the converted Vickers Vimy Bomber, on its pioneering flight from England to South Africa. During the nineteen twenties and thirties various military aircraft both from the South African Air Force and the Royal Air Force visited, participated in Air Displays and conducted photographic surveys in Rhodesia.

However, it was not until 1935 that an "air force" was established by the Rhodesian Government. This occurred on the 1-Nov-35 when an Air Section of the Rhodesia Regiment was established on a Territorial basis, and De Havilland (Rhodesia) Ltd was appointed to provide aircraft and undertake the elementary training of pilots. It is noteworthy that for the first years of its existence, the Air Section was without aircraft of its own.

Things progressed slowly as there was very little funding available. In 1936 airmen became members of the Permanent Staff Corps of the Southern Rhodesian Defence Force (as regulars), and the first course of apprentices was sent to Britain for technical training. In 1937 six Hawker Hart bi-planes were purchased from the Royal Air Force and two experienced flying instructors were obtained from the same source, on secondment.

## **Southern Rhodesia Air Unit (SRAU)**

By the 1-Apr-38 the Air Section had been accepted as an autonomous force, and was renamed the Southern Rhodesia Air Unit, becoming independent of the Rhodesia Regiment. On 13-May-38, the first course of six Rhodesian pilots received their wings and in Sep-38 ferried six Hawker Audax aircraft to Salisbury from the RAF base at Heliopolis, Egypt.

Serials and markings of SRAU aircraft followed normal RAF practice except for an 'SR number' on the side of the fuselage. Rumours persist of further aircraft being delivered both to the SRAF and SRAS early in WWII, from RAF Middle East sources, but thus far no evidence has been found to support the claims.

## **The Warriors**

On the 28-Aug-39, A and B Flights of the Southern Rhodesia Air Unit (Note the SRAF had not yet been formed) left Cranborne and deployed to their war stations in Kenya, East Africa.

The unit consisted of six aircraft, two Hawker Hart (SR3 & 5) and four Hawker Audax (SR10, 11, 12 and 14) of the SRAU. They were supported by the SRAU's Dragon Rapide (SR8) and two chartered from Rhodesian and Nyasaland Airways (VP-YBJ & VP-YBT) which returned to Rhodesia after the deployment was completed.

The best evidence we have for the composition of the personnel is that ten crews deployed on the 28th with further crews following later (see listing below). This was the first commonwealth air unit to deploy to its war stations. Further Rhodesians joined the unit prior to Apr-40 when it became No. 237 Squadron, RAF.

## **WW2 Deployment Listing:**

The SRAU deployment on the 28-Aug-39 consisted of both RAF and Rhodesian personnel. The following are a list of the Rhodesians.

Pilots:

Sqn Ldr Maxwell (RAF KIA 1944, London) - CO, R. Christie, A.T.R. Hutchinson, E.W.S. Jacklin, H. Peyton (post Apr-40. lost/forced landed/ died of thirst), E. Smith, G. Smith, R. Marshall, E. Spence, Capt Styles, Ticky Tyas (KIA 18-Mar-41).

Air Gunners:

Sgt Kimpton (post Apr-40. lost/forced landed/ died of thirst), Sgt A.F. Burl, Sgt O.R. Collins, Sgt J.S. Gray, WOP/AGs: Sgt K. Murrell, Cpl H.L. Maltas, T.J. MacDonald.

Within twenty four hours of arrival they were out patrolling the Somaliland border from forward bases, with scratch RAF ground crews, who were already in position. "A" Flight under command of Flt Lt (later Gp Capt) Graham Smith patrolling the Northern sector as far as the Abyssinian border, and "B" Flight under Flt Lt (Eric T.) Smith patrolling the Southern sector down to the coast. When ground crews became available "C" Flight was formed under the command of Flt Lt "Tickey" Tyas (later shot down and killed over Cheren in Eritrea). Throughout the "phoney war" their role remained that of watchdogs with rigid instructions not to stir anything because until the South Africans arrived in Kenya, they were the only "Air Force" there. The army had little else other than the Kenya Defence Force, officered by Kenya farmers.

Thus matters stood when on 19-Sep-39 the Southern Rhodesia government re-named the SRAU, the Southern Rhodesia Air Force, with A and B flights (in Kenya) becoming No 1 Squadron SRAF.

## **Southern Rhodesia Air Services (SRAS)**

Now to leave the fighting men and look at the organisation at home in Rhodesia. On the same day as the formation of the SRAF (19-Sep-39), the SR government formed Southern Rhodesia Air Services. SRAS was to be a combined Airline, Meteorological Service and Communications Flight for the (yet to be formed) Rhodesian Air Training Group of the RAF. Most civil aircraft in the country were impressed into the SRAS. Those SRAU aircraft that remained in the country were also absorbed and the complete RANA fleet was impressed on 01-Feb-40.

The manning of the SRAS comprised, SRAF personnel in Rhodesia, except where they were scheduled to join the Rhodesian Air Training Group, all the RANA staff, and volunteers/conscripts. It should be said that there were very few "conscripts", the vast majority of individuals volunteering!

A more detailed history of the SRAS and its aircraft may be found in the SRAS aircraft listing and its accompanying text.

## **Pilot Training**

Thus far the "formal" organisation of the air elements in the opening phase of World War II have been covered. We now need to look at the pilot training undertaken by the SRAF during this period.

The SRAU conducted flying training of their own pilots before the war - with assistance from de Havilland (Rhodesia) Ltd.

At the start of WWII, until the emergence of RATG, the SRAF continued pilot training courses. The training was conducted, at Belvedere, by the same SRAF instructors who had previously conducted flying training. Aircraft were loaned to the "SRAF trainers" by the SRAS for this training.

The first course started on the 2-Oct-39 and the intake was from existing commercial flying schools and air services. 14 members completed this course on 22-Nov-39 as fully-qualified pilots. Most of them as well as, air gunners and ground crew, who had also received training, proceeded to Kenya to join No. 1 Squadron SRAF.

This first course having 'vacuumed' up most of the experienced pilots in Southern Rhodesia, it was agreed that until RATG took its first intake (planned for April 1940), the facilities at Belvedere would be used to teach volunteer recruits to elementary level and they would proceed to the RAF for advanced training.

Two further Elementary Flying Courses of 50 hours were run. These courses enabled the pilot cadets to fly "solo" but did not qualify them for the award of the flying badge (Wings). Pilot cadets who successfully completed the course, were posted to the RAF for advanced training. The 40 pilot cadets from the first course went to the UK or Middle East for further training and the second of 22, went to the Middle East (RAF Habbaniya).

In parallel with the pilot training a number of air gunners, fitters & riggers and photographers completed training courses.

## **Rhodesian Air Training Group (RATG)**

Rhodesia's main aviation contribution to the allies during WWII was the hosting of and support for the Empire Air Training Scheme, in the form of the Rhodesian Air Training Group. RATG was operated and controlled by the Royal Air Force and supported by the SRAS.

Upon the outbreak of war the UK commenced the dispersal of flying training throughout the commonwealth, as previously agreed. The SR government participated in the scheme, financed all the infrastructure of the organisation in Rhodesia and provided a notable proportion of the manpower. The formation of the Rhodesian Air Training Group was announced on 4-Jan-40. Preparations for its introduction began immediately. The first training unit, No 25 Elementary Flying Training School at Belvedere, started flying on the 24-May-40, and the first Service Flying Training school (advanced training), No 20 SFTS, starting flying, at Cranborne, on the 10-Jul-40.

During the years of World War II and after (until 1947), the Royal Air Force was the sole military force flying in Rhodesia. Roundels, Serials and Codes were applied in accordance with normal RAF practice.

A detailed history of the group and its aircraft may be found in the RATG aircraft listing and its accompanying text.

### **Southern Rhodesia Air Force (SRAF)**

On 19-Sep-39, the air unit was formally renamed the Southern Rhodesia Air Force, and SRAU flights (in East Africa) become No.1 Squadron SRAF.

Those few military aircraft remaining in Rhodesia were transferred to Southern Rhodesia Air Services.

On 1-Apr-40 (although the latest research suggests it may have been the 23-Apr-40), the SRAF was absorbed into Royal Air Force and No.1 Squadron, SRAF was re-designated No. 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron [of the RAF]. The SRAF *in practical terms* ceased to exist from this date.

For legal and accounting purposes, Rhodesians serving with RATG were appointed to the SRAF and paid by the Southern Rhodesia government, as were those called up to serve in the SRAS. After deployment overseas (on the successful completion of their flying training), Rhodesian aircrew were transferred to the RAF(VR).

### **RAF Squadrons**

**237** - When 1 Squadron SRAF was re-designated 237 Squadron, RAF; (on 1-Apr-40) it was manned by Rhodesian personnel. It served in East Africa, the Middle East and Iraq as an Army Cooperation squadron. In Mar-43 it became a Fighter Reconnaissance squadron and served in North Africa, and Corsica covering Northern Italy and Southern France. By the middle of the war it had lost its "All-Rhodesian" nature as other nationalities filled gaps in the establishment. It was disbanded in 1945.

**266** - In Aug-40, 266 squadron was designated a "Rhodesian" squadron and Rhodesians began being posted to it, although no Rhodesians had reached the squadron during its activities in the Battle of Britain. In Fighter Command, the squadron conducted fighter sweeps across the Channel and over Northern France. Then, with 2 TAF it provided close support for the ground troops as the advance across Europe proceeded. It was disbanded in Aug-45.

**44** - Rhodesian personnel were concentrated into this bomber squadron which was designated a "Rhodesian" squadron in 1941. Its most notable raid with Bomber Command was the Augsburg Raid for which Sqn Ldr Nettleton won the VC. The squadron continued to serve after the war until it was disbanded when the Vulcan Squadrons were finally disbanded in Dec-82.

As well as the Rhodesians who fought in these three squadrons there were many more who served in other Royal Air Force units and in other theatres of operation. During the six years of war the numbers of Rhodesians in the RAF rose to 977 officers and 1,432 other ranks. Of these, 498 were killed; i.e. more than one man in every five who went to war. 228 Rhodesian airmen received decorations or awards.

### **Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps**

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 RATG.

The military units of Rhodesia comprised the SR 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 SRAS (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.

### **Southern Rhodesia Air Force (SRAF)**



On 28-Nov-47 The SRAF was re-established as a permanent unit and from that date until RATG eventually closed, both the Royal Air Force and the Southern Rhodesia Air Force took to the skies above Rhodesia.

The "enthusiasts" had been building up an air force for some time before the official announcement of its establishment. And the first 'modern' aircraft, a C-47A Dakota was donated to the 'force' on the 12-Nov-47, serialled SR25. See note 12.

Finance for re-building the SRAF was virtually non-existent. The remains of Tiger Moths were recovered from RATG scrap dumps and re-built. Aircraft serialled SR26 to SR39 were acquired in this manner.

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.

Pre-war serials were not re-used, SR21 being the first serial allocated. RAF roundels were displayed on wings and fuselage with green/yellow/green bars on either side of the fuselage roundel.

In 1951 the Dakota transported pilots and ground crew from Rhodesia to Britain, to fly the first and second Spitfire ferries from UK to Rhodesia. These ferries were both completed and all but two of the Spitfires arrived in Rhodesia in approximately ten days, a task which the RAF doubted could be achieved. This was the air force's first acquisition of something approaching a "modern" military aircraft.

### **Southern Rhodesia Auxiliary Air Force (SRAAF)**

In 1949, with very few aircraft and without funds for the provision of equipment or personnel, the SRAF formed the SRAAF to man a first operational Squadron (of Spitfires due for delivery in 1951). The aircrew members (mostly WWII pilots) were unpaid and without travel allowances or expenses of any sort. The SRAAF continued to fly until, with the introduction of jet fighters (DH Vampires), Air Force HQ decided that all aircrew would be regular airmen. The SRAAF was disbanded in Jul-53.

### **Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF)**



On the 1-Sep-53, the SRAF was re-named the RhAF, upon the creation of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland.

The green/yellow bars had already begun disappearing from the fuselages prior to this change. The the new markings were composed of RAF roundels with 3 Assegai's superimposed on the central red circle, on wings and fuselage. However "SR" serials continued to be used on RhAF aircraft (after Sep-53) until the formation of the RRAF.

### **Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF)**

On the 15-Oct-54, Her Majesty conferred the title 'Royal' on the force and it became the Royal Rhodesian Air Force. Henceforth, the force would adopt a strategic role as part of a commitment to commonwealth defence, as well as traditional internal security activities. This would be reflected in future aircraft acquisitions and annual deployments to the Middle East (supplementing the RAF) from 1957.

During the first fighter deployment to Aden in 1957, RAF technical control cast doubt on the RRAF returns showing 100% serviceability of their Vampire FB.9s. The following morning the RRAF detachment flew a 16 aircraft formation (its complete fleet) to demonstrate the accuracy of their

paperwork. And during the last Bomber deployment to Akrotiri, Cyprus in 1963, the Canberra B.2s of No 5 Squadron RRAF won the NEAF Bombing Trophy.

The transport element also demonstrated their value when, during the first Kuwait emergency of 1961, RRAF Argonaut C.4s moved some 700 troops from Kenya to Kuwait for security duties. Later in 1961 RRAF Dakotas deployed to Kenya during the bad flooding of that year and assisted the RAF in the distribution of food to the local population.

The aircraft were re-numbered with an "RRAF" serial after Oct-54, but the roundels remained as previously. The first RRAF internal security operation took place in Nyasaland, from 21-Feb-59 and this gave rise to the adoption of green/brown camouflage on upper surfaces.

There was a major revision of RRAF serials from Mar-62.



Upon the breakup of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, on 31-Dec-63, the RRAF reverted to Southern Rhodesia control. The national markings were retained but with a single Assegai superimposed upon a C type, in place of the previously used D type roundel. The force continued to be known as the Royal Rhodesian Air Force and the use of RRAF serials continued.

The escalating Terrorist War brought a gradual introduction of overall green/brown camouflage.

### **(the second) Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF)**



Rhodesia became a Republic on 14-Mar-70. The force dropped the 'Royal' prefix and became the Rhodesian Air Force on the 8-Apr-70 (the second use of this name). A new, green/white/gold 'lion and tusk' roundel, was adopted. On the 22-Sep-70 formal instructions were given that RRAF serials were to be replaced by 'R' serials, although this process had started more than two years previously (from Mar-68).

Aircraft obtained by the RhAF (in defiance of sanctions) passed through the hands of multiple 'middle-men' often accompanied by 'fictitious' paperwork. Where shown in the serials table, the Previous Owner is that who previously operated the aircraft. The entries should not be taken to imply that the stated Previous Owner was involved in the transfer of the aircraft to Rhodesia.

### **RhAF, Base Number System**

Upon the change to 'R' serials, the Air Force adopted a base number system whereby the squadron number was inserted into the previous serial number (the base number), in a regular pattern to obtain the serial (except for No 1 Sqn which used an '8'), e.g. 1 Sqn Hunters: -

RRAF116	became	R <u>8</u> 116
RRAF117	became	R1 <u>8</u> 17
RRAF118	became	R11 <u>8</u> 8
RRAF119	became	R119 <u>8</u>
RRAF120	became	R12 <u>8</u> 0
RRAF121	became	R1 <u>8</u> 21
RRAF122	became	R <u>8</u> 122
RRAF123	became	R1 <u>8</u> 23 , etc

The base number system continued although in the later years (as the war hotted up), due to time constraints, it started to become corrupted.

On 4-Jun-73 instructions were issued for the removal of the national insignia and serials. Removal of the national insignia was fairly rapid and complete. The removal of serials was somewhat more protracted. First the 'R' of the serials disappeared, followed later by the complete serials. However, aircraft did appear with the numeric portion of the serials still applied for several years.

It should be noted that all aircraft were still allotted a serial number. After instructions to remove serials had been given, they were in many cases, applied where they could not be seen from the outside e.g. some Alouette III's had serials painted on the inside of the pilot's door.

The country was re-named Zimbabwe-Rhodesia on 03-Mar-79, but the Air Force title and serials remained unchanged.

### **Air Force of Zimbabwe (AFZ)**

The country became Zimbabwe and the Air Force, the Air Force of Zimbabwe on the 18-Apr-80.

### **Serial Changes**

Although dates for the start of the Rhodesian Air Force (1953), the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (1954) and the the Rhodesian Air Force (1970) are given in the Table, these are the dates of formal change-over. It will be appreciated that individual aircraft had changes of markings and serials applied at a convenient time, often when they went for major servicing, but individual aircraft servicing records have not survived.

### **Notes on the Rhodesian Air Force Aircraft Listing**

**Note 1** The aircraft listing accompanying this text details the serials used on all Rhodesian military aircraft. It is in Rhodesian serial order. The scattering of aircraft types amongst the 'R' serials is due to the use of the base number system.

**Note 2** Only the immediate Previous Owner and Identity are shown, as is the immediate disposal. Full aircraft histories are not included.

**Note 3** Data shown in **RED** is “a best guess based on available information”. Red text appears where “proof” has yet to be established. Where nothing is known the cell is left blank, except in the “Reg dates” column where an entry is required in every cell for sort purposes.

**Note 4** '[2]' behind the serial indicates second use of the serial.

**Note 5** **Abbreviations:**



AFZ	Air Force of Zimbabwe
CAA	Central African Airways Corporation
Cr	Crashed
(E)	Ejected
EF	Engine Fire
FAP	Portuguese Air Force
(K)	Killed
nr	near
RAF	Royal Air Force
RATG	Rhodesian Air Training Group (RAF)
RRAF	Royal Rhodesian Air Force
SAAF	South African Air Force
SAP	South African Police
SRAF	Southern Rhodesia Air Force
SRAS	Southern Rhodesia Air Services
SRAU	Southern Rhodesia Air Unit
t/o	Take Off
WFU	Withdrawn From Use
WO	Written Off

**Note 6** Southern Rhodesia Air Unit. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 7** Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps. See paragraph in text above. This Avro Anson Mk.12 was gifted to the Rhodesian Prime Minister by RATG in 1946, for his personal use. It became part of the "Communications Flight" in 1947.

**Note 8** Southern Rhodesia Air Force. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 9** The only serials known to have been allocated to these 12 Harvard 2's are SR42 and SR43. It is thought that the remaining aircraft flew with the SRAF in their RATG serials.

**Note 10** RAF Spitfire serials not shown were PK408, PK506, PK576, PK625, PK663, PK370, PK432, PK494, PK548, PK572 and PK594 but tie-ups with SRAF serials are not known.

**Note 11** Rhodesian Air Force. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 12** Serial SR151 is thought to have been allocated to this Dakota but not used. The aircraft retained serial SR25/RRAF25 which was of special significance to the Air Force. It was the first Dakota in SRAF service and had been the gift of the SA Prime Minister, Gen Jan Smuts, to the force in 1947.

**Note 13** Royal Rhodesian Air Force. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 14** (the second) Rhodesian Air Force. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 15** Kiewets were first used by the South African Police who were on attachment in Rhodesia. From about Oct-67 aircraft were deployed to Rhodesia un-camouflaged, with an SAP number in the one hundred range applied. From 5-Dec-67 camouflage was applied and the 'SAP' letters were removed. Several Kiewets were also provided to the RhAF on permanent loan. In Aug-74 the SAP were withdrawn from Rhodesia. Several aircraft remained with the RhAF (on

permanent loan) and henceforth a SAAF serial number (in the seven hundred range) was applied, albeit without the 'SAAF' lettering. Unserviceable aircraft were replaced on an 'as required' basis. 23 Kiewets are thought to have served in Rhodesia, only the 15 listed have been identified.

**Note 16** Kiewets and Alouette II's (also on permanent loan from South Africa) did not conform to the base number system, being given sequential serial numbers

**Note 17** RhAF Base Number System. See paragraph in text above.

**Note 18** When Genets were received by 6 Squadron they used the number 9 followed by sequential numbers.

### **Updates**

The article is as complete as is possible; given that much information has been lost, or destroyed. Additions and corrections are most welcome, to: - [davenewnham@uwclub.net](mailto:davenewnham@uwclub.net).

Dave Newnham  
Sussex, 2022