

A Brief on Rhodesian Aviation

by Dave Newnham

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It all started on the 5-Mar-20, when “Silver Queen II”, a Vickers Vimy Bomber, flown by Pierre van Ryneveld and Quintin Brand landed at Bulawayo on their way from England to South Africa. The importance, from a Rhodesian point of view, was that this was the first aircraft to land anywhere in Rhodesia. It was also the first aircraft to crash in Rhodesia, the following morning, on take-off. The circumstances surrounding the crash can best be summed up as, hot, high, short and heavy! Thus ended the inaugural flight – both triumph and tragedy!



A Vickers Vimy. This is a replica at a Woburn Fly-in.

They completed their journey in a DH.9 named “Voortrekker”, loaned to them by the South African Air Force. They didn’t set any records, having used 3 aircraft and taken 44 days to do it! But they were the first to fly from England to South Africa.

A burst of enthusiasm was generated locally and Airoad Motors Ltd was set up to promote aviation in Rhodesia. A hired Avro 504, named “Rhodesia” flown by pilots Earl Rutherford and C.M. Thompson, toured Rhodesia introducing a lot of Rhodesians to air travel in what we would today term joy-riding. After six months they returned to South Africa.

It was two years before the next aviation enterprise when Major Alister Miller flew another Avro 504, named “Matabele”, up from South Africa. The Rhodesian Aerial Tours Company was formed to administer the effort. Like the Silver Queen, this venture also ended in a crash and write-off of

the aircraft, at Rusape. Major Miller who was uninjured, went on to have a successful aviation career in South Africa and became the founder of “Union Airways”, the fore-runner of South African Airways.

The Golden Years

After that things went quiet on the aviation scene and it was not until the late 1920s that Rhodesian aviation came to stay. The first professional organisation to start operations in Rhodesia was the Rhodesian Aviation Company of Bulawayo (known initially as the Rhodesian Aviation Syndicate) which opened its doors on the 9-Aug-27. At first it used “Duggie” Mail’s aircraft, a DH.6 of World War One vintage named “Baby Tank”, which he shipped out from the UK and assembled himself! Upon hearing of the event, the de Havilland Aircraft Company sent him a congratulatory telegram saying that it must be one of only about six left in the world.

On 13-Jun-29, the company purchased its first aircraft, An Avro Avian, and by the 31-Aug the same year had developed beyond charter work and started its first scheduled service (a weekly service Salisbury-Bulawayo).

The aviation bug was stirring throughout the region. Also in Apr-29 the Salisbury Light Plane Club was formed, with Sandy “Moth-Eaten” Wynne-Eyton as the club instructor. The club purchased a DH.60 Moth which would eventually become VP-YAA, the first aircraft on the Rhodesian civil register.



Chris Perrem and DH.60X Moth, VP-YAA “Newton” c.1932.

In Jul-31, Christowitz Air Services of Blantyre, Nyasaland was established and by August was running regular services Blantyre-Beira in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique).

Boom

The major event of 1932 was the inauguration of the Imperial Airways UK-South Africa service through Rhodesia. The aviation business boomed and in 1933; in July the Rhodesian Aviation Company started a weekly Salisbury-Bulawayo-Johannesburg service; in August Christowitz Air Services of Nyasaland began a Salisbury-Blantyre service; and in October Rhodesian And Nyasaland Airways Ltd (RANA) was formed.

Rhodesian And Nyasaland Airways rapidly built up to become the major airline in central Africa. In Nov-33 it absorbed the Rhodesian Aviation Company and in Feb-34, Christowitz Air Services. In Aug-35 it started Salisbury-Beira and Blantyre-Beira services.



RANA representative aircraft c.1935. (DH Dragon Rapide, DH Dragonfly and DH Leopard Moth)

Additionally, the aviation bug was spreading; the de Havilland Aircraft Company of UK established a subsidiary company in Salisbury, De Havilland (Rhodesia) Ltd, which in Apr-35 started a touring flying training program using two instructors and a DH.60 Moth. Almost inevitably this venture became known as the "Travelling Circus". On 17-Jul-35, Ted Spencer, a garage owner in Livingstone started Spencer's Air Services, Victoria Falls; probably the first aviation enterprise directed at tourism in Rhodesia. Aviation continued to grow and in Aug-36 the first Southern Rhodesia International Air Rally was held at Belvedere, Salisbury, with participation by the Royal Air Force and the South African Air Force.

The military were also stretching their wings and on 1-Nov-35 the Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps Air Unit was established as a Territorial unit (within the 1st Battalion, the Rhodesia Regiment). De Havilland (Rhodesia) Ltd was contracted to provide pilot training and in mid 1936 Air Unit personnel were appointed as regular airmen of the Permanent Staff Corps of the Southern Rhodesia

Defence Forces. Also in July of '36, the first group of military aircraft apprentices was sent to RAF Halton in the United Kingdom for technical training.

Imperial Airways was given responsibility for the movement of the Empire Air Mail and by 1937 the aircraft in use on the African route were proving to small for the traffic, so on the 2-Jun-37, the company started a Southampton-Johannesburg flying boat service. Imperials' passengers for Rhodesia alighted at Beira in Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) and Rhodesian And Nyasaland Airways gained the contract for the supply of feeder-line services from Beira to Salisbury. Thus one flew on a Shorts S.23 Empire Flying Boat from Southampton to Beira and there connected with the DH.89 Dragon Rapide of RANA for Salisbury.

In November of 1937 the second course of SR Staff Corps pilots was commissioned and started training, This event is noteworthy in that the course included Lieutenant E.W.S. "Ted" Jacklin who would go on to become the first Commander of the Air Force. In Dec-37 the first two Hawker Harts, of the six purchased, were ready to fly at Cranborne aerodrome, Salisbury. In Feb-38 a De Havilland Tiger Moth, was received by the Air Unit, fully equipped for instrument flying. In April the Air Unit was renamed the Southern Rhodesia Air Unit and in September SRAU airmen collected 6 Hawker Audax aircraft from the RAF in the Middle East and flew them to Salisbury.



Hawker Hart of the SRAU, pre WWII.

Lieutenant Colonel C.W. Meredith AFC, was appointed Director of Civil Aviation and Officer Commanding the SRAU in Jun-39.

War

However, the dark stain of fascism was spreading over the world and on the 3-Sep-39 World War Two erupted... World War Two created a vast expansion in aviation and vast technical development. Rhodesian war-time aviation is well covered elsewhere so herewith a very brief run down of events.

The Air Unit went off to fight in East Africa and the Middle East and became the Southern Rhodesia Air Force. At home in Rhodesia, the Rhodesian Air Training Group of the RAF (RATG) was formed and conducted flying training of RAF aircrew throughout the war years and beyond. The Southern Rhodesia government formed the Southern Rhodesia Air Services (SRAS) and impressed into it all civil aircraft and the RANA fleet. No 1 Squadron SRAF was re-designated No 237 (Rhodesia) Squadron, RAF; which service also posted Rhodesians to two other squadrons, 266 (fighters) and 44 (bombers). Large numbers of Rhodesians (including women) attested into the local air force for the duration, and 2,409 Rhodesians joined the RAF and served overseas, of which approximately one in five did not return!

A New Dawn

The war changed everything and the world would never be the same again! There had been much development in aviation and there was the expectation of a new and better world! RATG continued its training role after the war but from being the nation-wide organisation it had been during the war, it shrank to three stations centred around Bulawayo and effectively, disappeared from sight.

In Oct-45 SRAS commenced operating as the national airline. The Southern Rhodesia government had originally intended that Rhodesian And Nyasaland Airways Ltd should be reinstated after the war, however, the governments of the three territories (Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland) decided to co-operate in a regional airline and on 1-Jun-46 Central African Airways Corporation (CAA) was born. The SRAS was dissolved and all its airline assets (including those ex-RANA) were handed over to CAA. CAA decided to standardise their equipment on the Vickers Viking and the de Havilland Dove and on the 19-Nov-46 introduced the first Viking scheduled services in Africa, followed on the 9-Dec by the first DH. Doves on scheduled services.



A CAA Vickers Viking, VP-YEW c.1947.

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 flight comprised a de Havilland Leopard Moth, an Avro Anson and two de Havilland Dragon Rapides. In 1947 the Communications Flight received its first "modern" aircraft, a Douglas C-47 Dakota which was a personal gift from the Prime Minister of South Africa, General Smuts. Then on the 28-Nov-47 the Southern Rhodesia Air Force (SRAF) was re-established as a permanent unit.

As the world found its feet again after the ravages of war, the major airlines resumed international scheduled services and in 1948 BOAC started a London-Johannesburg freight service via Salisbury, using Avro Lancastrians and then on the 4-May-48 it commenced a London-Johannesburg passenger flying boat service calling at Victoria Falls on the way. A great improvement on the pre-war service, using Short S.45 Solent flying boats (a development of the WW2 Sunderland maritime patrol aircraft) with CAA Vikings providing the connecting flights to Salisbury. CAA was not slow in the freight business either, starting the first air freight service in Africa, CAA's "Copper Trader" service using leased Bristol 170 freighters between the copper belt in Northern Rhodesia and Johannesburg.



BOAC Short Solent taking-off from Cape Maclear, Lake Nyasa c.1950

Expansion

In Jul-49 the Southern Rhodesia Auxiliary Air Force (SRAAF) was formed which was to provide refresher training for experienced WW II aircrew who would man two operational Squadrons. They would be equipped with Spitfire F.22s which were being purchased from UK and delivered in 1951.

CAA continued to expand; in 1950 it was one of the first airlines to introduce all-inclusive package tours. The following year it began day excursion flights to Victoria Falls and introduced low-fare night flights Salisbury-Johannesburg and Salisbury-Bulawayo.

Later in 1950 Central African Airways sought a means of extending their special air services in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland without increasing the cost of their operation. This network linked certain remote districts serving the European inhabitants whose numbers were too small to allow for a commercial operation. It served African passengers as well but although the cost of a flight was only a few pounds, that was more than most Africans could afford. It was understood from the beginning that these services would have to run without hope of profit. They settled on the De Havilland Canada DHC-2 Beaver. The introduction of the first Beaver in 1951 was an immediate success. Their service brought an end to the isolation of the European inhabitants of 23 remote African villages.



A CAA DHC-2 Beaver at Mongu, N. Rhodesia c.1952.

On the 7-Nov-50 the age of elegance and leisure died; when the last BOAC S.45 Solent flying boat passed through Victoria Falls on its way to Johannesburg. Henceforth, we would all fly in “Sardine Cans”!

The SRAF continued its concentration on pilot training and during 1952 moved its main base from Cranborne to Kentucky which would soon be re-named “New Sarum”. Then on the 14-Dec-52, a sad day for the air force when the first fatal accident since the war (within the country) took place. An Auster flown by Lieutenant Corruthers, Rhodesian Artillery, hit power cables over the Hunyani river and he was killed. The air force decided, with the impending arrival of jet aircraft, that henceforth the air force should be an “all-regular” force, and in Jul-53 the SRAAF was disbanded.

Another sad day on 29-Mar-53 when CAA had its first fatal air accident. Vickers Viking VP-YEY crashed in Tanganyika after a wing separated in flight, killing 13. CAA successfully sued Vickers Aircraft Company after a prolonged court case. But all was not doom and gloom since in Apr-53 CAA started the “Zambesi Service”, a colonial coach 4-day trip Salisbury-London using their Vickers Vikings.

Federation

Encouraged by the British government the territories of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland sought political union which would enable a much more stable economic structure for all

three territories, to be established. The plans came to fruition and on the 1-Aug-53 the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland was created.

Upon the creation of the Federation the SRAF changed its name and became the Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF) to reflect its new status and increased areas of responsibility. And later that year the first Percival Pembroke aircraft arrived in Salisbury and the first four jet fighters, de Havilland Vampire FB.9s. RATG ceased training in Jan-54 and on the 31-Mar closed down, and the RAF departed Rhodesia.

HM the Queen conferred a 'Royal' prefix on the Air Force which became the Royal Rhodesian Air Force (RRAF) on the 15-Oct-54. Henceforth the force would accept a strategic role as part of Commonwealth defence, which included annual deployments to the Middle East and assisting the RAF with transport commitments in the Persian Gulf and East Africa. In Nov-54 the RRAF received its first four Percival Provost training aircraft and in December the last flight of a Spitfire F.22 in RRAF service took place (SR64). And in March of the following year RRAF Thornhill at Gwelo was activated.

In 1956 a new Salisbury International Airport was opened at Kentucky (the other side of the field from New Sarum) with a 15,000 foot runway, at that time the longest in Africa. And CAA moved into the modern age with the acquisition of Vickers Viscount, turbo-prop aircraft. In Feb-57 BOAC introduced the Bristol Britannia on the London-Johannesburg service. It routed through Salisbury and the aircraft became known as the “Whispering Giant” due to the quietness of its flight with its four Proteus Turbo-props.



CAA Vickers Viscount at Salisbury International, c,1957. (Dave Newnham)

In Jul-57 HRH the Queen Mother visited the Federation to preside at the opening of the Kariba Dam. A VIP configured Douglas DC-4M Argonaut was used to transport her to and from Kariba to Salisbury.

During the 1950s several flying clubs had operated out of airfields around Salisbury, including Belvedere and Marlborough. Belvedere airport and airfield closed on 31-Dec-57. Three clubs amalgamated to form the Mashonaland Flying Club which started operations at Mount Hampden airport on the first day of the new year. Several “general aviation” companies also moved to Mount Hampden which became the general aviation hub of the Federation.



Three Piper Cub's of the Mashonaland Flying Club, c.1970.

In Jul-58 No 1 Squadron RRAF deployed its Vampire FB.9s to Khormaskar, Aden in support of British forces combatting dissidents in the Aden Protectorate. In 1961 No 3 Squadron sent Canadair DC-4M and Dakota aircraft to assist the RAF transport elements during the first Kuwait crisis and to Kenya to assist the RAF with flood relief operations.

January 1959 was a busy month; CAA inaugurated their 'SkyCoast' Service. This was an air-ocean liner holiday, where passengers flew from Salisbury to Cape Town or Durban, boarded a Union Castle Liner and travelled by sea to the other, and then flew back to Salisbury. Also during the month the Bulawayo airport at Kumalo closed, upon the opening of the new Bulawayo International airport on the site of the old (RAF) Induna airfield. And CAA flew its last Vickers Viking flight. On the first of the following month (February) CAA started the first of their 'Skybus' services. A “no frills”, cheap flight Salisbury-Blantyre.

Also in Feb-59 the RRAF conducted its first internal security operation in Nyasaland. For the first time adopting a war-like posture within the country. In March the first 4 English Electric Canberra B.2 aircraft were received by the RRAF, which provided it with a viable strike force and in December its strategic transport ability was upgraded by the arrival of the first Canadair DC-4M,

Argonaut aircraft.



RRAF Canberra's on detachment to NEAF, Akrotiri c.1963 (Dave Newnham)

In May-60 CAA introduced "Flame Lily" packaged holidays. In July the RRAF became involved in the rescue of Belgian refugees during the Congo crisis. And on the 1-Oct-60 the last "Zambezi Service" Vickers Viscount flight to London was made by CAA and a Douglas DC-6B was leased from Alitalia to continue a London scheduled service.

On 28-Apr-62 the RRAF's first helicopters were delivered, Sud Aviation Alouette IIIs. No 7 Squadron was formed to fly them. And in December, the forces first modern jet fighters arrived in the shape of Hawker Hunter FGA.9 aircraft for No 1 Squadron.

Dissolution

Development continued apace with an apparently bright future awaiting the Federation, however, the rumbles of political disquiet grew. By 1963 the differences were irreconcilable and the Federation was dissolved, Northern Rhodesia becoming Zambia and Nyasaland becoming Malawi. Upon the breakup of the Federation, the RRAF reverted to Southern Rhodesia control and the following year their aircraft started to be camouflaged. CAA had hoped to continue to provide regional services for the three nations and had developed "quick change" nameplates so that their aircraft could display the appropriate name (Air Malawi, Zambia Airways or Air Rhodesia) when flying in each of the territories, but it was not to be...

Around this time CAA was starting to suffer losses in revenue due to its elderly Viscounts being in competition with SAA Boeing 727s, particularly on the lucrative Johannesburg-Salisbury and Johannesburg-Victoria Falls routes. To overcome this CAA ordered two new BAC 1-11s (c/ns 039 and 040) which were due for delivery in 1966 and would have become VP-YXA and VP-YXB.

UDI

At the time of the dissolution of the Federation, the British government promised all three countries independence. It carried out its promise to Zambia and Malawi, however, it reneged on that to Rhodesia. After much fruitless discussion, argument and broken promises; the Rhodesians lost faith and more importantly trust, in the British government and on the 11-Nov-65, under Ian Smith, declared unilateral independence (UDI). Henceforth, Rhodesia would have a terrorist war on her hands as African nationalist extremists attempted to take control of the country by force.

On the 28-Apr-66 the first notable anti-guerrilla operation was conducted by the RRAF which became known as the "Battle of Sinoia". There was also, at this time, activity in the Mozambique Channel, off the coast of Mozambique as the Royal Navy at the behest of the UK government, imposed an oil embargo on Rhodesia, blockading the port of Beira. The effort was unsuccessful! In Mar-67 the first large "sanctions busting" operation took place when the RRAF received 8 Lockheed Aeromach AL60 B "Trojan" aircraft. And on the 1-Sep-67 Air Rhodesia took over all routes from CAA which was dissolved (officially on the 31-Dec).

Having declared Independence, Rhodesia took the next step and became a Republic on the 14-Mar-70, and the air force changed its name to the Rhodesian Air Force (RhAF), adopting the "Lion and Tusk" roundel.

Amidst all the doom and gloom the aviation bug continued to grow and 24-Jan-70 witnessed the first flight of a locally built aircraft, VP-WDA, a Taylor JT.2 Titch, built by the Rhodesian Aircraft Manufacturing Co.



The Rhodesian Manufacturing Co's Taylor Titch.

On the 28-Nov-72 the Air Force celebrated its 25th Anniversary and the majority of its aircraft participated in a ceremonial Flypast over Salisbury. On the operational side, 1973 saw the start of 'Fireforce' operations. Hunter-Killer groups of air force and army seeking out and destroying terrorist bases. The air force supplied bombers and ground attack fighters to strike at the enemy, Dakotas to drop paratroops and helicopters to lift heli-borne infantry for the assault.

The 14-Apr-73 dawned bright after a night of mysterious goings on! And on the hardstand at Salisbury International airport stood three Boeing 720-025 jet airliners adorned in Air Rhodesia colours. Rhodesia had entered the age of jet air travel. There was much speculation as to the source from which they had come but both the Directorate of Civil Aviation and Air Rhodesia remained tight lipped!



Air Rhodesia Boeing B.720 at Salisbury International c.1973 (Air Rhodesia)

The aviation bug was still doing his rounds and general aviation was thriving at Mount Hampden which on the 22-Jun-73 was renamed Charles Prince Airport in honour of one of the giants of early Rhodesian aviation.

International

In Mozambique the Portuguese were also having to cope with terrorist insurgency. A new government in Portugal sealed the fate of the Portuguese African colonies and on 11-Sep-74 FRELIMO was given an uncontested hand-over of power in Mozambique. At a stroke, Rhodesia had a border extended by hundreds of miles over which terrorist incursions could occur. Revocation of overfly rights by the Mozambique authorities heralded the cancellation of Air Rhodesia flights to Beira and Blantyre in Malawi.



A "Stick" boarding a "para-Dak" for an operational drop, c.1978.

On the 23-Nov-77 the first of the large external operations by the Rhodesian security forces took place. This was "Operation Dingo", an attack on the Chimoio guerrilla camp in Mozambique which was successful in neutralising large numbers of terrorists.

The 3-Sep-78 was another “Day of Infamy” when terrorists shot down an Air Rhodesia Viscount, VP-WAS, with a shoulder launched anti-aircraft missile. And then murdered many of the crash survivors at the scene of the crash!

The 18-Oct-78 marked the next large external raid, “Operation Gatling”, a highly successful attack on Westlands Farm (Chikumbi) guerrilla base in Zambia. It included the world famous radio conversation between the lead RhAF Canberra, “Green Leader” and the ATC tower at Lusaka when Green Leader warned the tower not to let Zambian Air Force aircraft take-off and attempt to interfere with the operation.



RhAF Canberra. The “Green Leader” message was broadcast from one. (Dave Newnham)

Yet another “Day of Infamy” occurred on the 12-Feb-79 when Air Rhodesia Viscount VP-YND was shot down, also with a shoulder launched anti-aircraft missile. This time there were no survivors! World leaders must also bear their share of guilt for these hideous crimes in that they completely failed to condemn the terrorists for their atrocities! The “Incredible Silence” referred to by Dean da Costa of the Salisbury Anglian Cathedral.

Over the next couple of years there were several more large external operations conducted by Rhodesian security forces. All were highly successful and they ranged far afield; from guerrilla bases in central Angola to those in Mapai and Chimoio in Mozambique. Bridges and small dams were also successfully targeted.

The United States of America, that bastion of Freedom and champion of down-trodden colonists being oppressed by an unjust colonial power; put intense pressure on Rhodesia to come to an accommodation with (surrender to) the terrorists. After lengthy and extremely difficult negotiations the Rhodesian government came to an agreement with the moderate black nationalists for the hand-over of power and on the 3-Mar-79, the country became Zimbabwe-Rhodesia with a black majority government.

But this wasn't enough for the hard-line terrorists who wanted it ALL and wanted it, NOW! After fruitless negotiations at Lancaster House during which the British government proved once again that it was ineffective and untrustworthy; the Rhodesian government was left with no choice but make the best of a bad job! On the 18-Apr-80, Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. The air force was renamed "The Air Force of Zimbabwe" and Air Rhodesia became "Air Zimbabwe".

Robert Mugabe took the post of Prime Minister and Zimbabwe started down the long road to ruin!



Sunset!