

# RHODESIA'S BUSH EAGLES

## THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA POLICE RESERVE AIR WING: PART TWO

In the concluding half of his series on the activities of the British South Africa Police Reserve Air Wing, established in 1957 as an aerial policing militia crewed by civilian volunteers, **GUY ELLIS** describes the unit's combat operations, for which its force of privately owned light aircraft was armed with guns and bombs to fight nationalist insurgent forces



**T**HE FIRST HALF of this series in *TAH37* covered the establishment of the Police Reserve Air Wing (PRAW), its pilots, their contribution during the Rhodesian Bush War and how the unit's crews learned to read the signs on the ground that would lead them to insurgent camps. In this concluding half we will look at the unit's combat operations.

### THE MISSILE THREAT

By the mid-1970s the increasing intensity of operations saw crews frequently subjected to small-arms groundfire. The initiative of local farmers came to the fore when Bill Ludgater placed a plough-disc on the seat of his Cessna 180F, VP-YWL, as a form of makeshift armour. This somewhat uncomfortable addition resulted in a local company manufacturing various high-tensile-steel armoured seats that offset weight against protection.

Not only was the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifle a danger from below, but both nationalist forces

TONY MANN VIA AUTHOR



— ZIPRA and ZANLA (see Part One) — were supplied with the Strela (SA-7 *Grail*) lightweight shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile (MANPADS) system. The high-gloss paintwork and polished metal of civilian aircraft reflect heat, and thus enhanced the chances of a “lock-on” by such a missile. Tragically, two Air Rhodesia Vickers Viscount airliners fell victim to Strela attacks, with the loss of all crew and passengers. As a result, local paint manufacturers developed a matt-grey paint with a low heat signature without an adverse weight penalty. This was adopted by Air Rhodesia, some small charter services and a few of the PRAW pilots. Many commercial and military aircraft were fitted with exhaust shrouds to direct engine heat away from the airframe.

PRAW pilots adopted both low- and high-altitude tactics to reduce their chances of being hit by a missile. A PRAW aircraft flying at treetop height, about 50ft (15m), denied a missile operator time to aim and fire, and flying above 1,200ft (360m) was beyond the missile's range. Some believed that just below the cloudbase was also safe, as the latter absorbed heat given off by the aircraft. Defensive flying became normal for all operators, involving high-speed steep-spiral descents and steep full-power spiral take-offs.

For self-protection Les Jellicoe and his father designed and constructed a tripod which fitted on to the seat rails behind the front seats of Wally Barton's Cessna 172, VP-YXZ. A Browning machine-gun was mounted on the tripod, and the starboard door was removed to provide a good arc of fire below the strut. Their fitting was inspected by the police and it was authorised once the arc of fire was limited to prevent airframe damage. The mounting was relocated to the port side, which became the preferred fitting as it allowed both the pilot and gunner to “keep eyes on” the target when flying a left-hand circuit.

Gerry Cleveland managed to find sufficient parts to repair a gunsight fitted to a Browning 0.303in-calibre machine-gun mounted on a tripod in place of the starboard middle-row seat of Cessna 206 VP-YYA. In this case a starboard installation was selected because the front section of the two starboard cargo doors of the Cessna 206 could be removed, and the rear door closed and locked. The observer/gunner sat in the middle-row portside seat, and the pilot sat in the right-hand seat to be able to look in the same direction



*Cessna 206C ZS-ZGZ was fitted with armoured seats and a single machine-gun mounted in the open doorway. Note also the bulletproof shield. Stored behind the closed rear cargo door would be 3,000 rounds of belted ammunition. Matt-orange paint has been applied over the anti-SAM grey to provide a civilian appearance ahead of the arrival of the international election monitoring force in December 1979.*