



OPERATION AGILA

THE COMMONWEALTH MONITORING FORCE IN RHODESIA, 1979-80

In 1979, after 15 years of internal conflict and international sanctions, a plan was put in place to finally resolve the “Rhodesia Problem”. In it, Britain and its Commonwealth allies would establish a ceasefire and oversee fair elections for the new state of Zimbabwe, all made possible by a truly international collaborative airpower effort, as **GUY ELLIS** relates

ON NOVEMBER 11, 1965, Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia, declared a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from the UK. [For more on this, see the author’s *Brothers At Arms in TAH15 – Ed.*] This decision was a response to Britain’s insistence that freedom from colonial rule could only be granted under the principle of “one man, one vote”. Consequently, economic sanctions were promptly imposed on Rhodesia by the international community, while black nationalists engaged in an escalating guerrilla war.

Following what came to be known as the Internal Settlement (or Salisbury Agreement), signed in March 1978, Rhodesia’s general election of March 1979 saw the establishment of a black-majority government. However, as the election ensured 20 white seats in the 100-seat parliament and was not based on universal suffrage, this government was not recognised by the nationalists or the United Nations (UN). The Lancaster House Agreement, ultimately signed on December 21, 1979, provided the structure required for a meaningful ceasefire and a move forward. Under this agreement, the UK would once again assume

governance of Rhodesia, overseeing a ceasefire period during which nationalist groups would assemble their forces at designated points. The British would subsequently also supervise the election of a new government.

Seeking support from its partner nations in the Commonwealth, Britain established the Commonwealth Monitoring Force (CMF), which comprised 1,500 personnel consisting of 800 British servicemen (including 300 from the RAF and Royal Marines), 150 Australians, 22 Fijians, 50 Kenyans and 75 New Zealanders. Additionally, four Royal Navy medical officers and five medical ratings were assigned to the medical needs of all those involved. During the elections a Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) contingent would provide air transport services for Commonwealth and international observers.

MOBILISATION

As the Lancaster House talks specified no end date, it posed a challenge for CMF commanders to prepare for what the British named Operation *Agila*. The Agreement stipulated that a seven-day ceasefire would commence from the signature date. During this period the nationalist forces were expected to gather at assembly points

Kenyan Air Force de Havilland DHC-5D Buffalo serial “207” (c/n 75) stands beside a batch of Westland Scouts of the British Army Air Corps’ No 656 Sqn – recently unloaded from a USAF Lockheed C-5 Galaxy – at Salisbury Airport in March 1980, during the operations conducted by the Commonwealth Monitoring Force in Rhodesia during late 1979–early 1980.

CHRIS WHITEHEAD / TAH ARCHIVE

