

ILLUSTRATED LIFE RHODESIA

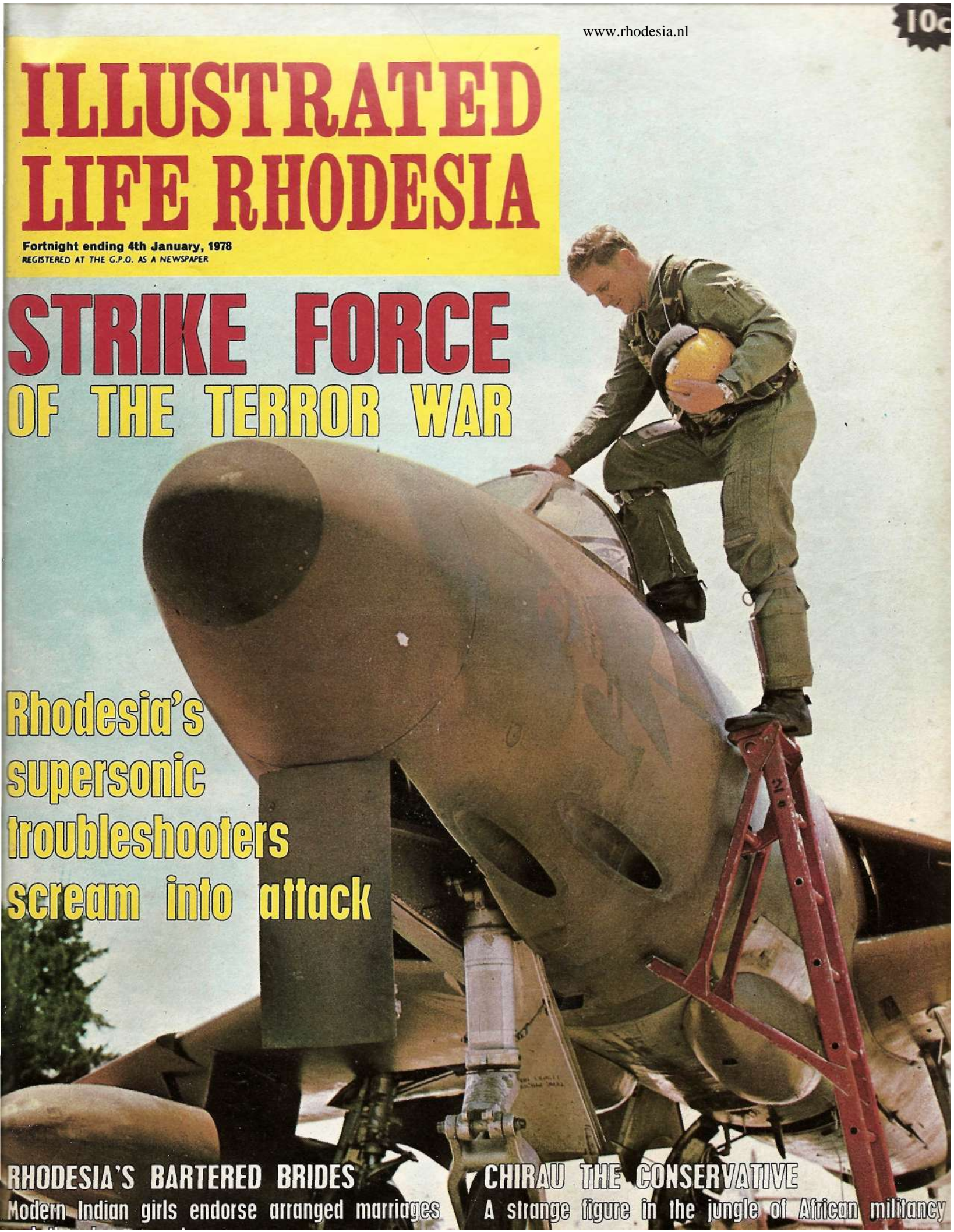
Fortnight ending 4th January, 1978
REGISTERED AT THE G.P.O. AS A NEWSPAPER

STRIKE FORCE OF THE TERROR WAR

Rhodesia's
supersonic
troubleshooters
scream into attack

RHODESIA'S BARTERED BRIDES
Modern Indian girls endorse arranged marriages

CHIRAU THE CONSERVATIVE
A strange figure in the jungle of African militancy



HUNTERS OF THE SKY

Portrait of a Squadron

The role of the high-flying Hunters has in the past been confined largely to counter-insurgency operations. But One Squadron is continually training for classical war; to protect Rhodesia's air space and eliminate targets inside or outside the country.

CHRIS ASHTON reports from Thorn hill Air Force base at Gwelo.

FIGHTER pilots reckon they wage a good, clean war compared with their comrades-in-arms on the ground, the Brown Jobs.

It was always so, from the earliest days of aerial combat, the dogfights over France in World War I. It was the same in the following war, with young Spitfire pilots fighting the Battle of Britain over southern England by day and repairing to the local pub by night.

And so it is in Rhodesia, the feeling among airmen on the ground that the war is somehow very far away. In One Squadron crew room at Thornhill Air Force base, Gwelo, pilots make coffee for themselves, leaf through newspapers and magazines, play a fierce game of ludo punctuated by roars of laughter.

Yet earlier that morning, a pair

of Hunter jets had been despatched to winkle out terrorists holed up in caves, encircled by security forces who could not get to them.

"We made some crispy critters," one of the two pilots of the mission remarks.

- Less than a stone's throw from the crew room door stand the Hunters, armed and fuelled to take off within ten minutes of an alert. They can reach any part of the country within half an hour. Normally they work in pairs, two on immediate standby with a further two replacing them as soon as the first pair take off. Nowadays they are averaging three operational sorties a week.

Compared with fighter aircraft of modern industrial nations the Hunter is a very elderly warhorse indeed. Says the Squadron

Commander, Squadron Leader "Rich" Brand: "If you look at everything else, like a Mirage or MIG for instance, it's a very sophisticated aircraft requiring a sophisticated backup."

The Hunter is ideally suited for a counter insurgency role, he continues: "It's got hydraulic controls. If they're damaged it can still be flown manually. And even if the engine fails it's still a bloody good glider. It'll glide two miles for every 1 000 feet of height."

From time to time Hunters have been fired at with small arms but none has yet been lost. Not that the pilots are cocky about this. Frelimo troops inside Mozambique's borders are known to have heat-guided surface-to-air missiles. None has been seen in Rhodesia but pilots treat every target on the basis that they might be here sometime.

Extra tanks and bomb racks

RHODESIA'S Hunters were purchased from the RAF in 1962. Even then they were second hand. "The Hunter was developed first as a fighter," Brand explains. "It's designed to be refuelled and re-armed in a turn-around time of 12 minutes." Since then extra fuel tanks and bomb racks have been added to the wings, extending its range — from Gwelo it can make Cape Town in a single hop — and its weaponry.

Each is armed with four 30 mm canons. Firing simultaneously, they discharge eight shells a second. The one pound shell explodes on impact with the force of a grenade. "The racket they make is terrible," says Brand. "You can see them twinkle as they explode on the ground."

Moving at 450 miles an hour the Hunter reveals itself by its noise only thirty seconds before it strikes. Says Flight Lieutenant Victor Wightman, the Squadron instructor: "I suppose you can run a long way in 30 seconds. I know I would if I saw the Hunters coming. I'd really leg it."

Since Rhodesia has total air supremacy over its own territory, the Hunters' combat role has so far been confined to support for ground troops in counter-insurgency operations. This is either in answer to an emergency call, where a security force unit is in big trouble in a contact, or as a pre-planned strike to knock out a known terrorist target.

In either case, the enemy must be pinpointed precisely to guide the fighters into target. They're too costly to be sent up just to cruise around looking for an enemy. Final approval for their use is usually decided in conjunction with



Squadron Leader "Rich" Brand: "We're not training just to kill a few terrors."

Combined Operations Headquarters.

THIS has been their task so far in the five-year-old guerilla war. But as the Squadron Commander makes clear, they also maintain themselves in constant readiness to play an expanded role. "Counter insurgency operations are a very small part of our training," he says. "We're continually training for classical war. We're not training just to kill a few terrors; our job is to protect Rhodesia's air space and eliminate larger targets inside or outside the country."

A dangerous aircraft

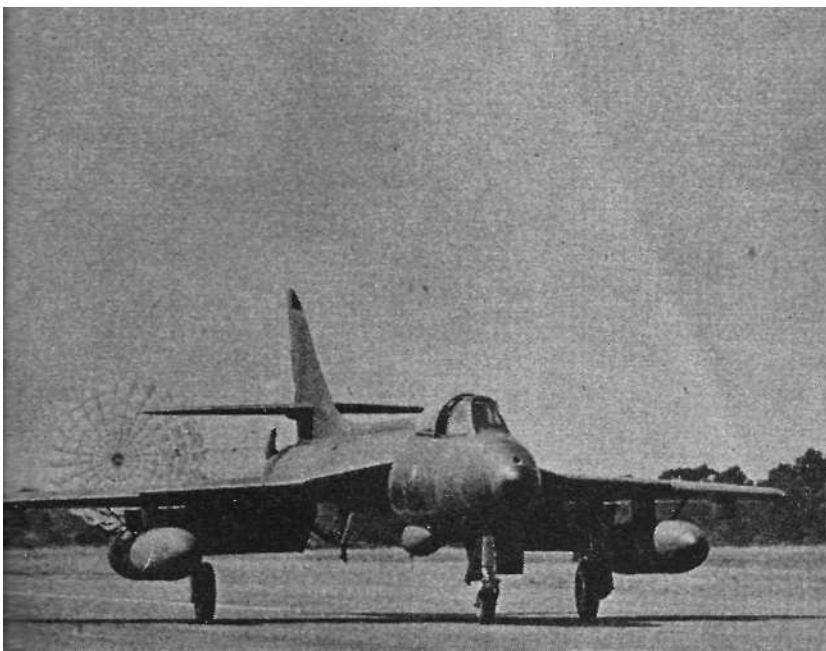
They assess the merits of the various aircraft they could face: MIG's flown by Cubans from Mozambique air bases for example. One Squadron has scant respect for MIG 21's because of their limited range — less than that of the Hunter.

The MIG 19, on the other hand, does command respect — "a dangerous aircraft". It is faster than the Hunter but its delta wing makes it less manoeuvrable. Members of One Squadron also, feel Rhodesian fighter pilots are more than a match for Cubans. "The aircraft is only as good as its pilot," says one.

Training includes flying in tight and loose battle formation, mock "dogfights" and air-to-air contacts — shooting at a 30 foot long flag trailing 1500 feet behind the plane.

On the ground it looks huge," says Brand, "but from the air it looks minute. You're turning into this thing at 2 000 yards. You track it, opening up at 400 yards and breaking off at 200 yards."

Brand was the central figure in



the so-called "Dustbin" Incident, establishing a permanent place for himself in Rhodesian Air Force legend.

A newspaper report claimed that Hunter pilots, (tagged by other Squadrons The Steely Eyes), could hit a dustbin in a jungle clearing with their 30 mm cannon. Other units ribbed them unmercifully, and presented them ceremoniously with a rusty dustbin. Brand's answer was to drill it from his Hunter on the shooting range and return it to the officers' mess, newly-galvanised with an inscription in red paint on the side, detailing the date and number of rounds fired (five).

In a mixture of mockery and respect, Hunter pilots are also known to other units as the Supersonic Sharpshooters.

Here, as in other armed services, good natured ragging between units is fair game. Hunters are

referred to by other squadrons as Chunters. For their part the Steely Eyes call Vampires Mechanical Tortoises or Whistling Wheelbarrows. Canberras are Twin Engined Vampires or Metal Dragonflies while the mosquito-shaped Trojan is known as the Anopholes or the Converter (since "it converts petrol into noise — and gets airborne only because of the curvature of the earth.")

YOU couldn't accuse One Squadron of false modesty. "No one mocks us too seriously," one pilot explained, "because they all want to be in One Squadron." It seems there's a waiting list as long as your arm to join the elite squadron when vacancies occur.

Normally it accepts only pilots with substantial operational experience in other squadrons. To convert from other operational aircraft, pilots begin with a week's

study of the Hunter's systems. This is followed by a succession of "flights", amounting in all to six hours, in a Hunter simulator.

Known as "the box", this is a diabolical contraption; a cockpit the exact replica of the real thing, dreaded alike by trainees and veteran pilots, who do periodic refreshers in it. An instructor sitting at a control panel in the same room can monitor exactly how the pilot copes with every contingency. He can be subjected to every conceivable mechanical failure, storms and winds of any direction and speed and his navigation on a proscribed "flight" can be checked for the slightest error.

"You can crash the box and it doesn't matter," says Vic Wightman. "It saves inexperienced pilots from bending aeroplanes. Because of the simulator they very seldom do." From the simulator

they go to the real thing, logging up 30 hours before they qualify as fully operational members of the squadron.

But to be fair to One Squadron, they all concede that the main burden of the aerial war is born by the reconnaissance pilots of Four Squadron and the helicopter pilots of Seven. "They're younger and often less experienced than us," Vic admits. "And in Hunters it seems to be less dangerous. You feel more invincible than in a slower plane where you can hear the crackling of small arms fire."

"They're at it for far more hours of the day. They take the mickey out of us, telling us to get up more operational time. That's fair comment. They're in the war the whole time. We're only in it occasionally.

"On the other hand, when the action's hot they're quite grateful to have us coming in to help." •

