

# WASHINGTON MPUMELELO BONCO

- STEVE TSHWETE

BORN in Mount Coke, a small village on the outskirts of King Williams Town, Wellington Bongco is one of the most outstanding fighters the National Liberation Movement has ever produced.

He was never much to school, only up to standard four or so. He worked hard to build the African National Congress during the 'roaring fifties'. In the Trade Union field he devoted all his energies towards founding and building a strong SACTU branch in East London. He worked closely with Masiza who died serving a twenty year prison term in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Masiza, a member of the Luthuli Detachment of MK, was captured in action in Rhodesia during the 1967/68 Wankie/Sipolilo campaigns.

## REGIONAL COMMANDER

Bongco was the Border Regional Commander of MK. He was arrested several times during his life of political activity in the ANC, and was a true embodiment of the principle of 'no surrender' and the idea of 'die alone!'. He was foremost in the preaching of his particular concept. "You must never reveal anybody with whom you are working to the enemy, and if you are tortured to a point where you can no longer hold out, then the best you can say is about yourself. Never involve the next man in it". That is what he used to say. A very energetic man he was. I grew up under his tutelage in a sense.

Bongco would work overtime, right through thenight and in all sorts of weather. His dedication to Congress work cost him loss of his job and had a telling effect on his health. Once he contracted TB and had to be hospitalised but he stuck to his work as the MK commander in the region. At times he had to escape from hospital to carry out personally certain MK operations. All this was revealed during his trial. We close as we were to him, did not know about some of his escapades. It is the people who turned against him and gave evidence in court who revealed all these things, and he did not deny a single one of them. He told the court that he had to do all these things for the liberation of his country and people.

He was arrested in March 1963 and was heavily assaulted by the police. When they released him (it was before the major swoop in the Border region in June and subsequent months) they were just escaping responsibility of him dying in their hands. When I paid him a visit at Frere Hospital where he was admitted from the cells I was frightened. It was my first time to see a man assaulted and tortured to that degree.

From the shoulders to the head it was just one big block. You would not differentiate the head from the shoulder. The eyes were just red like red meat. I was sure he was not going to survive. That is the occasion that inspired me to write my first and perhaps last article in a newspaper independently. I wrote in New Age what I saw of Bongco at Frere Hospital: *'Third Degree Methods in East London.'*

Very miraculously he recovered from that assault and when we went to Hospital to check him as we were paying visits regularly, we were told that he had been discharged. We rushed to his place and only found his wife who told us she had not seen him. We wondered what could have happened to him. Had he left the country maybe since there were instructions already from the National High Command that he leaves the country.

What happened was that on discharge from Hospital he went straight to the headquarters of the sabotage squad of the security police in Fleet street, East London. There he met Card, the man who had assaulted him. Sergeant Card was in charge of the sabotage squad in East London. Bongco told Card that he had been beaten up terribly and had reached that point where he felt he could no longer carry on with the struggle. *"I must now work for you. I am going to give you information, and I am starting right now."* He told Card that some time that week, on a particular day, time and spot, there was going to be a sabotage instructor from Johannesburg. *"He is going to meet us there. I am giving you this information and urging you to go and surprise that meeting. And you must not bring a lot of men because that might arouse suspicion."*

*"I would prefer a situation where you carry your radio. Take your men and post them at the nearest police station to the spot, which is the Duncan Village Police Station. In the event of some trouble you can communicate with them. But I am giving you my head for it. He is going to be there but you must go alone. Just for you to see that they are there and radio your men to come thereafter,"* Bongco said to Card.

Card was excited with this piece of information. He then apologised to Bongco and was happy with him. He instructed Bongco to go back to the movement and to never divulge that to any one. Bongco agreed and left. But as he was leaving Card called him back. He demanded that he surrender his reference book, so that in the event of anything happening to him (Card) that day the command at the Police station would know that he was out on a tip-off by Bongco. He also made him sign the following undertaking, *'I Wellington Mpumelelo Bongco am*

*responsible for anything that might happen to you on this day and vouch that this is true information.'* Bongco signed and went away.

## AMBUSH

On that day he and another comrade had guns and went to lay an ambush for Card. They were going to kill Card. Card had become a nuisance not only in the Border region but throughout the country. Bongco never told us about this experience. We only learnt about it when it was led as evidence in court. Card produced all the documents Bongco had signed and when he was in the witness box the prosecutor asked him if it was true and he replied: *"If Card had gone to that spot that day he would now be lying on his back and reading the 'Daily Dispatch' six feet under the ground"*. That was his popular saying, used whenever he was going to eliminate an enemy agent.

Bongco was arrested in August 1963. I was already in detention then, and we appeared together in court. We were supposed to be seven but were five when we appeared in court. The sixth Masiza (referred to above) had already left the country, and the seventh, Mdubi proved to have been a snooper. He had been infiltrated in the regional command. Bongco was sentenced to death on March 23 in Queenstown. When the judge wanted to know if he had anything to say before a sentence of death was imposed upon him he said he had and was called upon to say it. He said, *'You are going to hang Bongco but you will never hang freedom'*, and kept quiet.

That was my first time to be with a man sentenced to death. We shared the same cell. For the rest of us it was difficult even to eat the food we were given in prison. Bongco ate his and invited us to join him but we just had no appetite. Among the five of us only him and me smoked. He then made a 'zol' and gave a 'skyf' and I was not even in the form of smoking. We were just at a loss of words, not knowing what to say to him. When we parted (that is when he was taken to Pretoria) he gave his clothing to me to give it to his wife, which I subsequently did.

The Boers hanged him, but like he said, they will never be able to hang freedom. A thousand Bongcos have emerged to take his place and advance the fight for freedom. The revolutionary upsurge sweeping throughout the country is clear evidence.

LONG LIVE HIS MEMORY!