

# THE LONGEST THREE MINUTES IN MY LIFE

AN EPISODE BY COMRADE  
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OF UMKHONTO WE SIZWE

THEORY apart, this venture into a new area of struggle found us ill-equipped at many levels. Among the lot of us we did not have a single pistol. No one we knew had ever engaged in urban sabotage with home-made explosives. Some of us had been in the army but, for all practical purposes, our knowledge of the techniques required for this early phase of the struggle was extremely rudimentary.

The most experienced military man among us was Jack Hodgson who was appointed to the Johannesburg Regional Command of MK. Unlike me, he had really been through the war; a veteran of the Abyssinian campaign and a 'desert rat' during the early stages of the North African war, he was demobilised for medical reasons. He returned to civilian life to become one of the full-time leaders of the ex-service organisation — the Springbok Legion.

I have learned not to assume that every person who puts on a Communist garb is necessarily a dedicated revolutionary. But Jack certainly wore that garb



Jack Hodgson

with distinction. He expected neither position nor personal recognition in return for sacrifice. Jack and Rica's flat became our Johannesburg bomb factory. Sacks of permanganate of potash were bought and we spent days with mortars and pestles grinding this substance to a fine powder. After December 16 most of our houses were raided in search of clues. By a stroke of enormous luck the Hodgson flat was not among the targets. Had the police gone there they would have found that permanganate of



Joe Slovo

potash permeated walls, curtains, carpets and every crevice.

We had learned that this substance more commonly used in washing lettuce mixed with aluminium powder and catalysed by a drop of acid, could make an effective explosion. For timing device we had to experiment with various thicknesses of paper and cardboard in order to establish the time it took for the acid to eat through. We also managed to improvise an incendiary device using acid as the catalyst. The acid was placed in small bottle whose outlet was covered by a specific thickness of paper or cardboard and just before placing the device in the target area, one had to turn the bottle upside down.

## PRIMITIVE DEVICE

It was with this rather primitive device that I set out to burn down the Johannesburg Drill Hall which had housed the preparatory examination of the Treason Trial (1956). I had reconnoitred it carefully on more than one occasion and had chosen the spot which would have ignited not only the enormous wooden floor but also the hundreds of wooden chairs which

covered it. But when the moment came, I found that the military authorities had decided to have their monthly spring-clean. I entered the hall through a side door and found myself in the presence of about fifty Black cleaners who were removing the chairs, polishing the floor, etc.

I wandered through the complex in an attempt to locate another suitable spot. It was past five in the afternoon and the Administrative offices seemed empty of staff. I chose an office with huge wooden cupboards, turned the bottle upside down and was about to place the carrier bag behind one of the cupboard when a clipped military voice came from behind me:

*Can I do anything for you, sir?*" Although I feared that it might be too late, I had prepared for this moment.

I told him that my brother had received call-up papers but was about to take an important exam and could I be informed who I see about a possible exemption. The sergeant-major, who obviously had no inkling of my real intentions, politely asked me to follow him. I did so with racing pulse, knowing that the acid in that small bottle had begun to eat away at the flimsy cardboard. Had our kitchen laboratory calculated the fifteen minutes correctly?

Fortunately for both of us the officer dealing with exemptions had already left and I was politely advised to come back another day. I gave him a sweaty hand and walked briskly away. As soon as I decently could, I opened the tennis ball cylinder box which housed all the ingredients and snatched the bottle. The three or four minutes which preceded this were perhaps the longest in my whole life.

We were to discover the following day that Molefe, the first MK cadre to die in action, was killed in the vicinity of his target by a premature explosion which must have been caused by a defect in the acid bottle cover. Some hours after the drift hall incident I felt somewhat redeemed when, as part of a team Jack Hodgson and Rusty Bernstein, we dealt successfully with a manhole in the Johannesburg/Pretoria road which housed the telephone cables between the two cities.