

the happiest moment in my life

JOE MODISE, THE ARMY COMMANDER OF UMKHONTO WE SIZWE, RELATES HIS ROLE DURING THE FORMATIVE DAYS OF OUR PEOPLE'S ARMY.

PRIOR TO THE launching of Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1961 there was a feeling among the youth that the old form of struggle, which was non-violence, was not going to meet the demands of our situation and bring about the desired change. We as a disciplined group of young people felt that if the movement felt that the policy of non-violence was correct, we had to follow it. But we had misgivings about it. However with the suppression of the African National Congress after the Sharpeville massacre, this feeling of a different method of struggle gained a lot of prominence in our discussions and many people felt that there was no other way except to resort to armed struggle.

We acted even earlier than the actual launching of MK. With the declaration of the racist republic in May 1961, people were organised to strike. We felt that in order to strengthen this call we should also act independently but in a different way, no longer in a passive and peaceful way. So the late Comrade Joe Gqabi, myself and a number of other comrades decided to stop the trains that ran between Soweto and Johannesburg. We consulted technician friends who told us that if we threw a wire over the mains that supplies power to the electric trains, this would bring about a short circuit and there would be no power generated onto the line to enable the trains to move.

I led a unit that went to New Canada. We arrived there at about 3 in the morning, took a stone, tied it to a wire and threw it across the line that was supplying electricity. We saw a blue flame coming out of the electric wire when the contact was made and were sure that there was going to be a short circuit. But to our disappointment an hour later the train passed.

Comrade Gqabi took a unit that was going to blow a railway line with a stick of dynamite smuggled out of the mines. The stick of dynamite was attached to the railway line and according to their report it went off but the damage was minimal. This was due to the fact that apart from the lack of material we also had very little experience.

Realising that this was not a very big success, we undertook to carry out another operation aimed at destroying the telephone communications. We went



Joe Modise

to a place called Mondeor where there was a trunk line with lots of telephone lines running underground. Our aim was to destroy this, using the knowledge imparted to us by the late Comrade Jack Hodgson who was a thoroughly efficient teacher. We had a pliers and cutters with which we ripped the wires off completely. On our way towards home we felt that not enough work had been done. We thought we should give the enemy a little more work in restoring communications. We decided to go for the overhead telephone lines. We cut off some barbed wire from the fence next to the road, tied it to a stone and threw it over the telephone lines, then tied the wire to the back of the car and pulled it. We felt satisfied that for the night

we'd done a reasonable job. The following morning it was reported in the newspaper that saboteurs destroyed the main communications as well as the overhead telephone lines linking the Vaal Triangle and Johannesburg. These were some of our first actions before the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

Discussions continued amongst the leaders and I was contacted, apparently because my involvement in these early actions was known. I had discussions with some of the top leaders at the time, like the late Comrade Duma Nokwe and Comrade Walter Sisulu. We had discussions separately before we were officially brought together in Stanger, Natal, at Chief Albert Luthuli's place where the African National Congress, South African Communist Party, Coloured People's Congress, South African Indian Congress and Congress of Democrats met to discuss this new method of struggle. After two days of consultations, it was agreed that the ANC and SACP were going to undertake this new form of struggle whilst the other movements that were still legal should continue working legally. It was then decided that MK was going to be launched. I was told that I had to serve in MK and instructed to report to a house in Ophirton. When I got there I found the late Comrade Jacob Masedo, the late Comrade Andrew Mashaba and another comrade from the East Rand. Then to our surprise, (we were not told whom we were going to meet) I walked Comrade Nelson Mandela who was in hiding at that time. He told us that the movement had decided to embark on armed struggle and that we were going to be part of that machinery. I think we were amongst the first units. I don't think we were the only group because subsequently when we went to collect our material and get the little training that was given to us, we met other comrades who were also coming for theirs. At that time things were still done a bit amateurishly and the question of security was not given proper attention.

DECEMBER 16

I was given the responsibility for units in the Soweto area, Comrades Masondo and Mashaba were given the Pretoria area. But for December 16 the former and myself were given tasks in the Soweto area. I was to deal with the post office in Kliptown and Comrade Masondo together with the other comrades in Soweto were to deal with the administration offices in Meadowlands and White City. In my unit were Comrade Tladi and a comrade who was the chief of volunteers in Alexandra township. We were told that we would get our materials at a place which was going to be given to us later.

I was later contacted and instructed to go to a place in the centre of Johannesburg. I went into the basement where I was given a bundle of dynamite sticks with fuses. When I walked out of that basement where I got my training and a little paperbag where I put in my material, I walked Comrade Uriah Mokeba* wearing a big overcoat. It was obvious we had come for the same purpose because after I had left and moved towards the bus rank, I saw him also coming with his little parcel on his way towards Soweto.

As I've said, our unit consisted of three people. One was going to place explosives on the wall, the other one was going to set it alight and the third would be keeping watch for our security. We went to reconnoitre the place and noticed that it was fenced behind with a 2 metre high diamond mesh wire. We organised a pair of pliers that could cut the wire and handgloves to so that when we touched the wire no finger prints would remain. Comrade Masondo's unit was to use chemical explosives, a mixture of permanganate of potash and aluminium powder which would be detonated by the introduction of glycerine.

We were going to deal with one object because the distance we had to cover was long and they were going to deal with two objects because they were going to use chemical explosives. This would give them enough time to place both and retreat, whereas we were going to use dynamite which goes off instantaneously. So we wouldn't have the opportunity of placing the charge at one and then move to the second

before the first one exploded. So we moved to our targets from my place which was our meeting point

BIG EXPLOSION

On our way, halfway towards our target we heard a very big explosion. We got worried because the whole operation throughout South Africa was coordinated, so as to ensure the security of the comrades who were going to the various areas because if these explosions, particularly those in the same locality, went off before the others, the enemy would be alerted. And whilst the enemy would be looking for people who might have been involved, it would come across people who were still going to their targets. We were a bit worried and thought that it might have been because of lack of discipline or may be the



Joe Gqabi

comrades had not understood the instructions correctly. Nevertheless we continued, got to our target and took position. It was 23h30.

Comrade Tladi, who was our observer, was also given the task of opening a gap for us to enter from behind, because in front were security guards and there was also a small building which I thought was being used as a police station because there were always policemen in that area and we knew that they always sat in front of this place. We went in. I had a piece of clay which I used to position the explosive against the wall, whilst my comrade lit it with a burning cigarette by applying the cigarette tip to the fuse. As soon as the fuse caught fire, sparks began coming out and we knew it was

burning and started moving towards the fence rapidly.

It had been drilled into us during our training (of not more than five minutes) that under no circumstances should we be near these explosives when they go off because we would be blown to pieces. So our main concern was to get away from the point where the explosion was going to take place. We reached the fence. Under normal circumstances even at night it's not a serious problem to move back to the point which you used for entering a yard, but under these circumstances and especially because of our fear for explosives, it was difficult for us even to see the opening. When we eventually found it, it was a problem to get through. It appeared as if it had shrunk. Nevertheless we managed to get through and ran towards the trees that form a boundary between Pimville and Kliptown.

To our surprise we found the three minutes taking too long, much longer than the three minutes that had been determined by our instructors. I suppose this was due to anxiety on our part because we started getting worried and thought that something might have gone wrong. We started asking one another what could have happened but before we could finish the explosion took place. It was big bang. I've never been so happy in my life. I felt that the actual struggle had begun.

FIRST CASUALTY

We rushed home, running for about 12-13 kilometres. On our way we heard other explosions going off. We heard explosions in the direction of White City and Orlando East and thirty minutes later, whilst we were still running home, we saw police cars moving in various directions. We reached home safely and found Comrade Masondo back with his unit. He and other comrades, also from Alexandra township, slept at my place.

The following morning news was brought to me (I think by Comrade Duma) that an accident took place. The explosion that we heard on our way to Kliptown was at the Dube municipal office. The late Comrade Johannes Molefe was blown up in that accident. He was together with Comrade Ramotse who sustained burns on the hands and face. He was taken to hospital, which was a mistake on our part, because he was arrested after ex-

* Uriah Mokeba is the ANC Chief Representative to Angola.

perts checked his clothes and established that he was involved in that explosion. We struggled to bail him and to our surprise the regime agreed. I think at that time they were not as prepared and vicious as they are now. After his release on bail, it was decided that he should leave the country. I brought him out of the country. We travelled in a car of one of the comrades past Dinokaneng where the two of us were dropped and proceeded on foot up to Lobatse, where arrangements were made for Comrade Ramotse to go abroad.

After the December 16 operations I was given the task by the High Command (that is before I was incorporated into it) of helping with the creation of MK on the ground. We had to organise Umkhonto in Natal, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Kimberly. I went out initially by car, drove up to Durban where I met comrades who were already brought together and we established the Natal Command. From there I went to Port Elizabeth where I met Comrade Govan Mbeki who handed me over to comrades who were going to form a regional command. I then proceeded to Cape Town, set up the Cape Town machinery and returned to headquarters.

I went back to Port Elizabeth on a second occasion to get reports as to how far the command structure had organised units on the ground.

As I was leaving Port Elizabeth on my way to Cape Town, I realised that I was being trailed by police. This surveillance was constant right up to Cape Town where I had a very difficult time. They chased me all over the place until I managed to shake them off, using back doors and passages. I saw the Unit in Cape Town and took their reports. I then had to go to Kimberly to set up the machinery there. For security reasons I was to board the train in Paarl and was driven there by a white female comrade.

But to my surprise when I got into the train I discovered one of the white Security Branch officers who were chasing me around Cape Town on the same train. It was obvious that I was being followed even to Kimberley. I did not know the place and I was going there for the first time. I was given an address and was afraid that if I get off in Kimberley, I would lead these security police to the people I was going to meet. I decided to go back to

Johannesburg and just before we got to Johannesburg (at Randfontein) I jumped off just when the train pulled off and made it impossible for them to get off. Fortunately another train pulled up which I boarded to Johannesburg and got off before I reached Johannesburg, at Westbury, where I took local transport home.

TRAINING ABROAD

During this period whilst I was going through all these areas I was also given instructions to inform comrades that they should start recruiting cadres that were going to be trained abroad. I also had to work out methods of communication so that when the comrades were sent from Natal, Eastern and Western Cape to Johannesburg, headquarters had to be informed in time.

After some time comrades started coming out. The first unit that came out was from the Eastern Cape.

Subsequently units came also from Natal and the Western Cape. They came to Johannesburg where we found accommodation for them amongst supporters of the movement. We then organised transport for them to be taken to Botswana. The first group to leave was taken straight to Francistown. From there we hired a truck that took them to the border between Botswana and Rhodesia (Both still under British rule). Locals near the border informed us that provided they had the local Rhodesian currency it wouldn't be difficult for them to get transport. This we acquired at the border through exchanging with people coming down from Rhodesia. We gave them directions as to how they were going to get to Dar-Es-Salaam.

From Rhodesia they found their way up to Lusaka and from there they proceeded to Tanzania. The next group that came out came up to Kazungula. At the time the roads were clear only from Lobatse up to Francetown. Between Francetown and Kazungula there were no roads to talk about, just a little bush track which was so faint, and at some places there was nothing at all. The Rhodesian route was used once. The second time there were students who were coming out (the comrades amongst whom was Thabo Mbeki). They were arrested and deported, fortunately to Botswana.

We then had to use charters and managed to get a charter

that flew them out. But because we were aware that we could not be able to use charters for a long time, firstly because South Africa and the British would exert pressure on the owners, and, secondly, they were very expensive, we reconnoitred a route to Kazungula. We found a local person who was willing to assist us. I was involved in the reconnaissance with this man and when we returned he agreed to help us with transport as he had a truck.

Meanwhile the charters went on. There may have been two or three more until the one which was to charter the headquarters was sabotaged by the boers. So the Kazungula route became the main route. From Kazungula, recruits went to Livingstone where we acquired the assistance of UNIP. Zambia too was still under the British.

We managed to get a few loads of comrades through Livingstone. Sometimes we would come with a group of about 30 comrades on the truck, at times 35.

Transportation of comrades from their areas up to Johannesburg from there to Botswana, Zambia and finally to Tanzania cost a lot. At that time the movement did not have the resources that we are having now, even friends then were not as many as today. So the question of funds was a serious problem. Most of the money that was used for transport during those days came from the movement. It was only in Tanzania where we got assistance from some of the governments that were going to give us training facilities. We got assistance from the Ethiopian, Egyptian and later the Algerian governments. The Algerians sponsored our initial training and later the Chinese. I think we sent one group to China from then onwards we acquired most of our training from the Soviet Union. We had one unfortunate incident that also made me to leave in a hurry. Some comrades crossed, we gave them instructions and we hoped they would make it with the assistance of UNIP. Unfortunately when they got to Livingstone, they were arrested and deported to South Africa. After this incident it became clear (I was already serving in the High Command in Rivonia) that as soon as they reached South Africa and were tortured I was going to be