

THOUGH WE HAD NO AK47's NOR REVOLVERS

Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim is a founder member of Umkhonto we Sizwe. He served in the Natal Regional High Command of MK with Comrades Billy Nair, Goerge Naicker, and Curnick Ndlovu. He was arrested in 1963, became accused No. 1 in the ensuing Durban Trial, and was sentenced to fifteen years on Robben Island. He spoke to DAWN.

I was approached to join Umkhonto we Sizwe at its formation in 1961. The leadership had identified certain activists from the Congress movement and someone would be delegated to approach you. At that time of course the question of a change in the methods of struggle and armed struggle was dominating the debates at all levels of the movement. So from those discussions the leadership would pick the cadres whom they thought were favourably disposed to the armed struggle.

The emergence of Umkhonto we Sizwe in 1961 sparked off lots of enthusiasm among the people. Although we were not that many in the beginning, our actions were very widespread. With my unit we carried out at least eight acts of sabotage in the Durban Central area alone. They resulted in many people coming forward in search of MK. Most of the people who came wanting to join the organisation were subsequently sent out of the country to undergo military training.

A significant feature of our operations was that we were not well-trained. We had received a very crude type of training. We lacked the professionalism that our cadres display now and we were not exposed to the facilities of training we enjoy today. The only form of explosive we used was dynamite, which we stole, and that was all we had. We had no revolvers and AK-47's, let alone knowing how to use them. But given all that, we really had the state worried, for in that period, lots and lots of sabotage attacks were launched.

There's a bit of a story I recall about this dynamite we stole. Next to the road construction sites then there used to be little sheds where dynamite was stored. Not knowing how big the dynamite is and how it looks, we went with a carrier bag, only to find that there were big boxes. There were also little metal pieces which we later learnt



Billy Nair

were detonators. We did not know what they were and we threw them all away. Then we had to learn how to store and use it. And from that little stock of dynamite we were able to supply other provinces as well.

Despite that we were not well-trained, we suffered no casualties. None of us were arrested. Nobody was blown up. We really had the police worried. Despite their intensive investigations, they were not able to uncover us. At one stage, for instance, they had themselves so organised: I was living in an area called Greyville. There was a police station nearby. Immediately there occurs an act of sabotage anywhere in the area, the police would check on me.

They did that with a number of cadres whom they suspected were members of MK. At times they would wake me at two in the morning, demanding to know when I came home. Then I would know that there had been an attack somewhere. But despite that, with the correct use of timing devices, we would plant an explosive charge at a target and reach home in time, and when the police came they always found us at our homes. It was only with the introduction of the 90 days detention without trial law, the solitary confinement and torture that went with it, that the police were able to uncover some of our units and bring some of us to trial.

TIMING DEVICES

We also did not have factory-made timing devices. We had to solve the problem of how to ignite the fuse. We discovered that if you pour a certain chemical (acid) onto sulphuric powder, fire results. Then we had to develop methods of delaying the liquid from contacting the powder. We found that if you put it in a capsule, it takes about half an hour to eat through it. So once it eats through the capsule, it will contact the powder which in turn will burn, igniting the fuse. To prolong the delay to about an hour, we would pour the acid into a small capsule and put that small capsule into a bigger one. At most, that was the time required by our transport to deliver us at our respective homes.

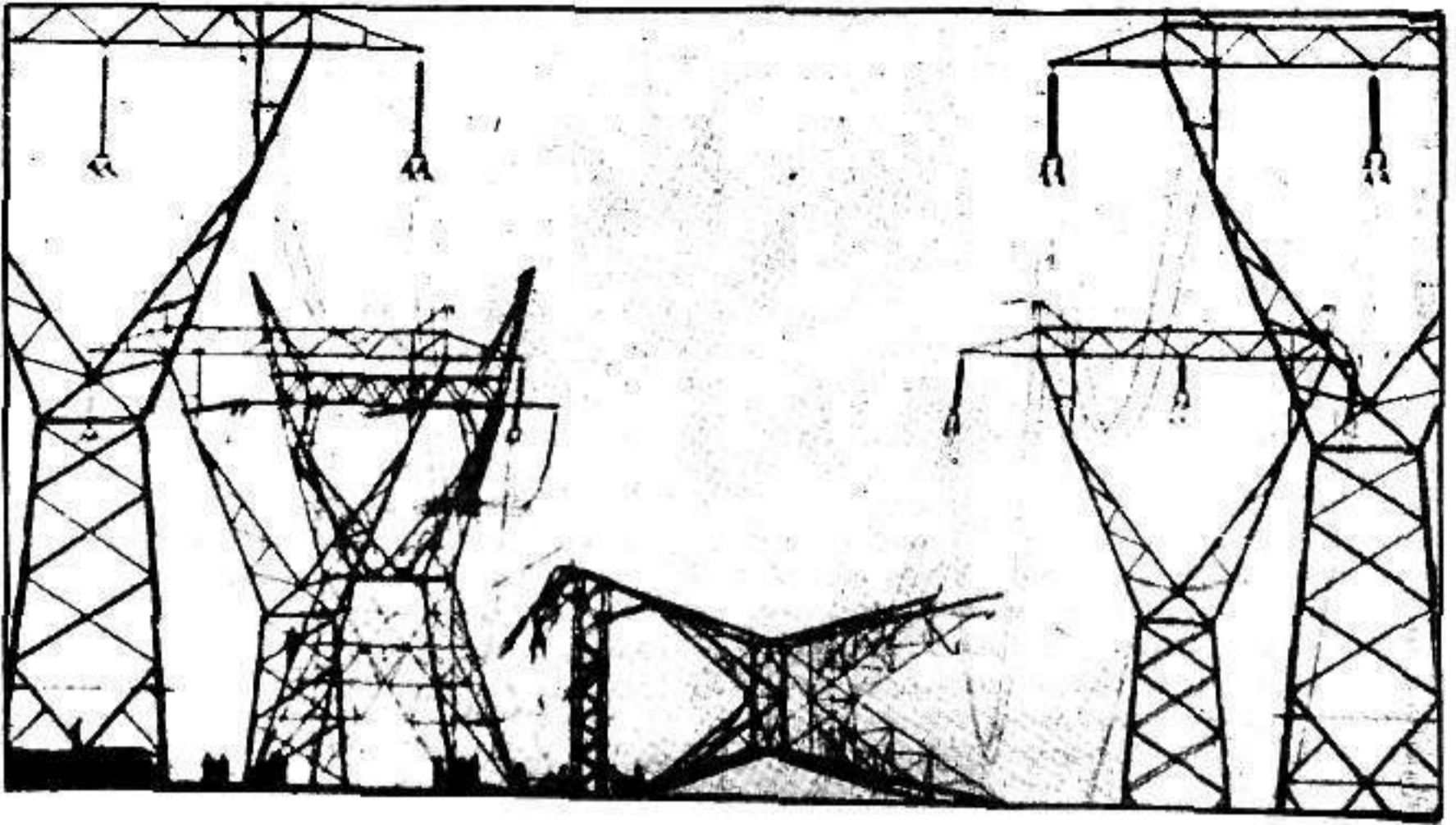
The attacks we were carrying out were mainly on government installations: power lines, telephone cables, railway lines, offices, etc. The instructions were that we had to be very careful not to endanger or harm human lives. Only once did we blow up the offices of the Nationalist Party newspaper — *Natalia* — and there were two minor injuries. But on the whole no lives were lost.

BIG OPERATION

One big operation I was involved in was when we plunged the whole of the Durban area into darkness for many hours. We blew up a very big pylon in a place called Montclair, just outside Durban. Ronnie Kasrils and I had gone to the area weeks earlier to conduct reconnaissance. The place was hilly and sparsely populated. We worked out a route passing through some houses.

One night we went to this area. We were four, including Billy Nair. We planted the dynamites on two legs of the pylon. This required lot of work. You had to place the dynamite against the object and tape it to stick, get the fuse and put it into the charge. Then, at the spot, you had to fill the capsule with acid, making sure that the acid does not touch you. Which is not a very enviable task. Of course you had to use gloves.

As I was walking home with a



friend, the whole Durban area went dark. I then knew that our operation had been successful. At this stage I was working for *New Age*, our newspaper. Of course the editor, Comrade M.P. Naicker did not know that I was involved in this act.

The next morning the radio and the press carried it. I took my camera and went to the area in the afternoon to photograph the pylon that was blown up. I went to the local population to enquire where the pylon was so that nobody would think I knew the place. When I got there I took the photographs for *New Age*, and those were the first actual sabotage pictures to be published in *New Age*.

VICTORIA BRIDGE

Another operation I was involved in was in the Durban Central Area. People who know Durban will remember Victoria bridge in the old days. Underneath trains were passing. Even here we did thorough reconnaissance of the area. We studied the time-table and established all the times for the trains. We did not want to destroy the railway line when there was a train passing, in accordance with the instruction that we should not endanger lives. We also established the location of the watchmen, the railway police and how they operated.

Again we used dynamite. At this time the enemy was making good use of police dogs. Meaning that even if you had left the area you still had to see to it that no traces remained behind. Someone suggested that we use chilli powder. After planting our charges, we left the area safely.

An enormous explosion followed. I was living about 3½ kilometres from this area and I could

hear the explosion. That operation earned a lot of publicity. When I walked past the area the following morning on my way to work, I could see hundreds of people crowding the area, watching the damaged lines. The trains were delayed for many hours.

We also blew up an office of a stooge, A.I. Kadjee. He was collaborating with the government. We decided to get to his office in the early evening. It was in a passage. There were people upstairs. We thought we would break in through a window and put the explosive in the office so as to blow up the whole office. When we were about to break the window, we saw the night watchman approaching. He shouted at us. We had to run away and he gave chase. He thought we were thieves. So we left the place to conduct fresh reconnaissance. This time we decided to make a very quick job. We put the explosives next to the door whilst somebody was keeping watch on the night watchman. After placing the charge we made a run for it, disappearing into the busy streets of Durban.

We were away for hardly five minutes when we heard a big explosion. The damage caused to the office was quite extensive. This was one place where we could not use the timing device because we thought the night watchman would discover the explosive before it went off.

Those were some of the big operations, in the sense of that time, I was involved in. There were other small operations. There were also a lot of experiments that did not work out. For instance, once we devised what was called a pipe-bomb. We took

pipes, sealed them and put the explosive powder inside.

We wanted to blow up a telephone cable. We then put this pipe-bomb on it. We do not know what happened because when we went to check three days later, we found the pipe-bomb still hanging there. It had gone off but nobody even noticed it because it had done absolutely no harm to the telephone cable.

Also as an experiment, we attacked goods trains with Molotov cocktails. We would stand on top of a bridge and throw the petrol bombs on passing goods trains. As you know, they are covered with thick canvas. That also did not seem to work. In some cases it did but with very minor damage inflicted.

NATAL COMMAND

Serving with me in the Natal Regional High Command were Curnick Ndlovu, Billy Nair, George Naicker, Ronnie Kasrils. At first we did experiment some form of ranking system but abandoned it later. There was just a leader of the group, Curnick Ndlovu. I was the leader of the Durban Central Group.

After the arrest of Curnick Ndlovu and later Billy Nair, Ronnie and I decided to go underground, establishing the underground structure of the Natal Regional High Command. Unfortunately Bruno Mtolo, Mr X in the Rivonia Trial, was also a member. He is the man who decided to break and collaborate with the police after his arrest. He led to many arrests, including mine. He also became the main state witness during our trial.