

A MERCENARY OF APARTHEID

Talks with Dawn

A Former Member Of The SADF Related To DAWN A Painful Ordeal Of Being An Outcast In The Eyes Of His People For Being A Mercenary Of The Apartheid Defence Force.

"I was born in Zwelitsha in King Williams Town. I started schooling in 1968 at Vakpan Bantu School. In 1975 I changed to Zwelitsha Higher Primary School" the sad story begins.

He, like many students, was affected by the 1976 countrywide student uprising which displaced many Black students. With poverty throttling his family, and unemployment rampant, he found himself in the claws of the South African Defence Force. He joined batallion 21 at Lenz in 1977. He was seventeen at the time, still in standard six.

His basic training included rural and urban counter-insurgency operation (coin). Brutality Characterised their training course. As a result one troopie died during their training, while three others were disqualified due to serious injuries they had sustained.

He carried heavy electric pylons for distances as long as 500m and used to pull truck tyres for 40km. How much did he earn? "A pittance of R98 per month was worth the risk than to face starvation", he confessed. Another reason for joining the SADF is the exemption it grants from pass laws, bantustan classification, and the security the barracks provide as a home.



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of their trucks were destroyed by land
PUNISHMENT

Inhuman methods of punishment were employed to ensure discipline. A 25kg sandbag for a two-hour physical training session, crawling for long distances, and carrying electric pylons for kilometres on end were the most common. One trooper died from heat exhaustion while being punished. Those who sustain permanent injuries are dismissed with a stroke of a pen.

Generally, for both Blacks and whites, hostility characterises the relations between the troopers and their officers. By 1978 the situation had extremely ran out of hand. Many troopers were getting injured or killed. Under pressure from the parents of white national servicemen, Constand Viljoen, the chief of the racist army, had to intervene and some restraint was noticed. For Blacks things continued the old way, nevertheless. Being privates in the permanent force, they continued their training under bestial conditions.

It is quite shocking to note that despite these conditions the number of Blacks in the SADF has made a dramatic increase. About 200 Africans appeared before the selection board in 1977. By 1979 this number had risen to 2,000. Most of the recruits come from Qwa Qwa, Transkei, Ciskei and Bloemfontein.

RIDICULOUS EXERCISE

To qualify, the recruits undergo an aptitude test. The test includes one of the most ridiculous exercises in the civilised world. One is presented a photo album with photos marked A and B. He is required to choose one and write what he thinks about it. The list runs as follows:
 — Farm labourers toiling on a very hot day, with a white overseer barking orders at them. Five sentences about one's opinion of the photo.

An African at crossroads. One road leads to the city and another leads to the bantustans. Which road must the man choose, and why?

A — An African in traditional attire looking at himself at a pond.

B — An African in modern clothing inspects himself at a mirror. Which photo is good, and why?

A — A White man carried shoulder-high by cheering Africans.

B — Piet Ritief surrounded by angry Zulu warriors. Choose one photo and comment.

One would not expect such a test even at a mental hospital.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Racial discrimination is rife in the SADF. Salaries reflect this colour-based disparity. A White 'baas corporal' earns a higher wage than his slave counter-part, a black corporal. As a member of the permanent force, our informant was not supposed to buy his uniforms, which he bought from time to time.

On a visit to the 'Coloured' Corps at Faure he discovered that their infantry unit at Lenz was charged with camp duties which otherwise were performed by a staff unit at Faure. The problem in their case was that the staff unit was White. He also found out that at Faure everybody used the swimming pool. At Lenz only the White administration and staff unit could enjoy this privilege.

To avoid the embarrassment of a slave who punishes his master, necessary precautions are taken. A soldier can only be punished by his unit and not by any officer. Therefore a black sergeant, the only rank an African can attain, can never find himself in a humiliating position of punishing his colour senior, a white soldier.

OUTCAST

When our informant was issued his first weekend pass he was warned that Soweto and Sebokeng were enemy territories! and that going to any of the two areas in military uniform was at his own risk. Going to a disco in the neighbouring Indian township, Lenasia, was strictly prohibited.

In Soweto he was looked upon with contempt. Back at home during holidays, his friends, the young people he grew up with, completely avoided contact with him. "I seemed an anathema to people wherever I went. My girlfriend was dissuaded from associating with me. I became an outcast among my own people".

TURNING POINT

1979 was a turning point. He was deployed at Mpasha (sic) in Northern Namibia. His unit strength was about a company. They were sent on a search and destroy mission of a PLAN guerilla base. This abortive mission followed many other patrol missions they carried out while white units were taking it easy at base at Mpasha. They were also given orders to rape women who were suspected to be SWAPO members and kill locals who refused to co-operate. Defying orders in the operational area was out of question. This would earn one no punishment or detention barracks but death by firing squad.

They marched for a week without success. Every strip of information from villagers sent them on a wild goose chase. Finally a word came from the racist command that they were within seven kilometres from a heavily fortified Swapo base. They were ordered to retreat.

While retreating they were ambushed by the heroic fighters of PLAN. Their unit was completely overwhelmed. They emerged from that ambush very disorganised. Three members of their unit were killed and one lost. A number

of their trucks were destroyed by landmines and shells.

They were quite shaken when they reported back at Mpasha. Discontent broiled. Two soldiers of their unit lost their sanity. It was also at Mpasha where they met national servicemen (NS) who showed antagonism and distrust towards them. The NS were shocked to find Africans who were in the army for employment. According to these NS the army is not a workplace but a 'help-mekaar' institution for the defence of South Africa.

RESIGNATION

When they returned to Lenz in 1980 discontent was at its height. In September they defied performing camp duties and refused to wear military uniforms. Their list of demands contained only one item: immediate resignation. The racist authorities called this a mutiny and threatened them with the notorious detention barracks. They did not budge an inch and remained firm. Ultimately, after they could not be cowed even by the summoning of a SADF unit with gas masks that surrounded Lenz, they were discharged from the SADF.

But this happened not to be his last experience with the SADF. In no time they found him a job at Sanchem, an ammunition factory. He was employed as a security officer. To his dismay, he learnt that he had to undergo a six week training course in intelligence. His job was to be no simple guarding but to monitor ANC guerilla movements in Soweto, particularly those who might seek employment at Sanchem.

This had gone beyond his humble expectations. He wanted a job simply, with no strings attached. As a result he resigned again. The Soweto student uprising and the many heroic mass struggles in subsequent years made their mark on him. He realised that his future and that of his people lie in fighting with arms against the regime. He joined Umkhonto We Sizwe in 1983.