

*An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim*

## **MK Special Operations Unit Project**

### **Interviews**

**George Dikgang Nene**

**28 April 2017**

**Tshwane**

**Comrade Nene, tell us a bit about your personal background, how you were drawn into politics and what drew you to the armed struggle specifically...**

In the early 70's Kgalema (Motlanthe), Sipiwe (Nyanda), the late Stan Nkosi and I became friends. We met because we were working for the Joburg municipality, in the stores section. Then we were getting frustrated with what's happening politically and what was not happening. Some of us were closer to the Black Consciousness Movement. Me too, with Willy Nhlapo.

We agreed when SASO (South African Student Organisation) started that the conscientisation period should not last too long. So, Siphso Buthelezi and Saths Cooper were then delegated by SASO to go and find out in Botswana or in the other neighbouring countries which liberation movement would be closer to our ideals as SASO. And that report never came on time. So, whilst we were waiting, what brought the four of us together was soccer, jazz and the politics of the country.

So, when SASO was not moving, we took a decision, the four of us. The first trip was going to Botswana. I did not go. Stan Nkosi went there, if I remember, and Sipiwe. They came back with a report, and we felt it was not complete; they have to go to Swaziland. And Stan went with Kgalema. When we reviewed the two reports we felt the more serious organisation was the ANC.

In Swaziland when we went for further discussion, the instructions came that we should form a cell of the ANC which was going to concentrate on recruitment of the younger generation, mainly for MK. Nothing was happening in the country and Chris Hani and them were still languishing after the Morogoro Conference. There was no connection with inside the country.

Well, they taught us a few things in Swaziland...So, we recruited in Soweto, but divided ourselves. I used to stay in White City, with Stan Nkosi as well. I wouldn't

recruit in White City, I would recruit probably in Dube, where Sipiwe comes from. We did that recruitment and transported comrades, we took them to the border. And then we would collate our reports and find somehow to send them to Swaziland. And that friendship between the four of us has continued until today.

We were, as far as I know, the first organised cell of the ANC after the sixties activities came to an end, the first to systematically organise for the ANC. We said there's this void, we have to organise for the ANC, and more importantly, strengthen MK. SASO was at the time filling in the void but we could not continue with them for many political reasons. The four of us said we're filling the space on our own. So, that's how one went into politics.

I was teaching History and English at Morris Isaacson High from 1972 to '73, and then I went to work at a bank. When the SASO Trial started, I was not at work often, so they ended up firing me. Then the John Vorster guys (security police) collected me.

### **Why?**

They wanted me to go and give evidence against SASO. No, I resisted that.

### **Did they leave you?**

Yes, they left me because I couldn't give them the evidence they wanted. So, that's when from '73 we became very active as a unit recruiting. And then we left the country.

### **When did you leave the country?**

I think it was early 1975 – then we got a report that police intelligence had information about our deeds. So, the leadership in Swaziland advised let's leave Kgalema and Stan, and Sipiwe and I must go outside the country. Sipiwe left in December '75 and I left in January '76 only to realise when we were in Swaziland en route to our training that within a month the police had swooped on Kgalema and Stan. That's how they went to Robben Island.

I reported in Swaziland as a refugee, and then we were taken to Maputo and Dar es Salaam. I then went for military training to Ukraine, part of the old Soviet Union. Probably I was the only one who came back from there who joined Special Ops. In Ukraine I trained with artillery, the Grad-P that hit Voortrekkerhoogte. There were only a few of us who had trained in artillery.

We came back to Angola and I was in the military in Benguela. I was a political instructor and a marching drill instructor. In Benguela there was us, as the older June 16 comrades, and then also the younger June 16 comrades.

When we came back from the Soviet Union, I only stayed about two months in Benguela, and then I was deployed to what we then called the front areas, that is Mozambique, Swaziland, among others – and I was in Maputo.

**Which year would that have been?**

I can't exactly remember. But when the Political Military Council was headed by Mabhida. I was then transferred to work in the Transvaal machinery. It was headed by comrade Pass Four (Johannes Pungula).

Then I moved to Swaziland in 1978. I got a job as a teacher. I taught at two schools, initially one for the disabled in Mbabane and then later at another school where (ANC activist) Joe Pillay was also teaching. When he was kidnapped, they were not looking for him, they were looking for me, but I was out in the mountains that night.

Then Special Ops was formed. There was this recognition of the importance of armed propaganda and the need to carry out lightning strikes against the regime. Joe Slovo, overall Commander of Special Ops, said I must go to Special Ops. The first Commander from day to day was Obadi. And after he was killed it was Chris. Then it was Rashid.

**What was Chris's real name?**

Who knows? He came from Rockville. He died in Swaziland with George Ndlovu.

**That's George's proper or MK name?**

His proper name. He came from Orlando.

**So, what was your role in Special Ops?**

I was sent to open a transitional base for MK fighters who were passing through Swaziland into South Africa. And the best way that I could do that was to be legit and register and work. Teacher during the day, guerilla at night. Our busiest time was when I was with Joe Pillay at St. Joseph's High School. Actually he used to be my neighbour, the principal gave us a small room to stay in. It was advantageous because then you could hide amongst the Swazis and the students and still do your political work.

But we were so disciplined. I've known Sipiwe since the early '70's. When we were in Swaziland he was heading the Transvaal Machinery, I didn't even know what he was doing and he knew very little about what we were doing. I would be called to Maputo and be told that here is a brief, they are preparing a group of comrades, depending on the target, in Angola that will come through. My job was to make sure that I receive them inside Mozambique at Namaacha at the border, cross the fence with them. I then took them to safe houses that we had hired. And then I prepared them because by that time they arrive, including Barney (Molokoane) and the others, I shall have received my instructions. We will go through the plans and everything with them. I had a courier who would come, collect the materiel (limpet mines, grenades and other) and then he or another courier would meet them at the first border town inside South Africa where they will stay, at Nelspruit or Piet Retief, and then help them to get inside the country to carry out their operations.

Now what was interesting also, is that I would only know three in a group - the Commander, the Commissar and the person who's taking care of the security for the group. That's how we operated. They knew me. I knew them. But there was no social time amongst ourselves. I would sit with them, go over the plans...

When the time comes, sometimes I drive them and I had to find a reliable Swazi who also helped as a driver because sometimes the group was too big for one car. So, my role would be to take them from Maputo and ensure they went into South Africa and then retreat and wait for them to come back.

### **Would you cross over with them into the first town?**

Not many times. I'd cross with them some times but most of the time you give them the maps about where the stuff (materiel to carry out the operation) is buried, you tell them how to identify the courier or the contact inside the country, and then they have their own instructions, which they would not share with me – how they're going to operate when they are inside the country.

### **Did you know their targets?**

Yes.

### **Did you know that they were going to hit Sasol?**

Mine was a transitional role in Swaziland for the comrades going in, but I knew they were going to do the Sasol operation. And most of the time the information about the targets, though it was not spelt out, we think, came through the contacts of Joe Slovo. But on Koeberg I think it came through a contact of Mac

Maharaj. He came to Swaziland to ask me to help the Koeberg comrade understand how to operate.

I had to have an idea where the operatives were going inside the country so I could ensure the courier could get them to the right place.

I then had to stay listening to Radio 604 to hear when the operation has taken place, then you know that the comrades are retreating. Then I keep my machinery in Swaziland ready to welcome them and then we go and sort of hide them for a night or two in different places. And then you take them to Namaacha, the border with Swaziland and I'll leave them there to go to Maputo.

I had a limited staff of two people, one of them was George Ndlovu. He used to stay with me in Swaziland. I'll remember the second one, we were only three operatives of Special Ops.

**In what capacity did you serve in Special Ops?**

A Transitional Commander.

**Was it just for Special Ops or all MK operations?**

No, Special Ops only.

**Were you answering to Slovo and Obadi?**

Yes, I was answering to Maputo directly because these other machineries had their own structures, such as Transvaal Urban.

**Tell us a bit more about Special Ops...**

In a nutshell, to me, the impact of Special Ops was, as everybody might know, very huge. We hit targets that were not easy – Koeberg, Voortrekkerhoogte. Sasol was not easy too.

And we had our setbacks in the sense that sometimes in your group when they're supposed to leave, one or two have vanished and I have to go and look for them. But you can't stop the group. Obviously, somebody who has been picked sometimes has some doubts about an operation, finds time in Swaziland and vanishes. I don't remember any of them vanishing into the country, they just vanished in Swaziland until we found them to take them back to Maputo and for the Command to deal with them.

But we were operating also in a very hostile environment. Part of the Swazi police hierarchy was co-operating with the Boers. So, as operatives in Swaziland, especially the Commanders, we would meet and say how do we deal with this threat. And look for ways of protecting ourselves and ensuring that our missions are secured and continue. We were told as soldiers both in the front areas and in Angola that the Political Military Council had taken a decision that we must strengthen our presence inside the country. Special Operations was meant to, you know, fire up the confidence of the people inside the country and the ANC cadres in the underground and outside. The operatives had to operate with the utmost secrecy and discipline.

In MK generally, we got reports that in some rural areas the MK comrades misbehaved. Some were drinking too much. Those who were smoking, we had no problem with that. But then we did not brief them that in an area where you are, you can't just go and buy certain types of cigarettes or in packs of twenties. Blacks don't have the money to buy a packet of twenty. That would raise suspicion and the police could be told. I think that's how Barney and them got surrounded and then they had that long battle in the Pilanesberg area in the Western Transvaal. We sent a report to headquarters that it doesn't look like in the areas you identified there is enough sympathy or support for the ANC.

So, they decided that (ANC, SACP and SACTU veteran, John) Nkadimeng be moved to Swaziland to become head of the ANC mission so as to ensure better discipline among the cadres, which, I think, worked.

(Moses) Mabhida (SACP and ANC veteran) was also asked to move to Swaziland and be in charge militarily.

So, I think we had to give some comrades special training and ensure their discipline – and this is what Special Ops was also about. We needed to inspire the populace about the necessity of MK. Special Ops was also about what we called lightning strikes on the enemy that would bring doubts to the apartheid soldiers and undermine their overconfidence.



**George Nene, Department of Military Veterans**

### **How successful you think Special Ops was?**

Most of the missions were successful and were carried out according to instructions. The targets identified were carefully selected. The aim was also to avoid unintended consequences for ordinary civilians. To me, they were

successful because they were carried out to the letter.

And you would have somebody coming for Easter holidays in Swaziland and they look for people like us and say, 'hey gents some of us who are there at home, we are waiting for you. Now I'm here, coming to look for you. I'm ready to help.' About 10 came like that. Others went to Siphwe and others. I don't think people would have come to us if these lightning strikes didn't take place.

I think these lightning strikes had shaken the Boers' confidence. How can these guys (Special Ops' operatives) be so correct? How can they be so up to the mark? To know what they are doing? And commit very little mistakes? Obviously, they were highly trained.

Looking at that time, MK, unfortunately, was only successful in the Eastern Front. It was less successful in Natal. Lesotho never became a strong area from where to send in MK cadres into the country. We had to do it from Swaziland – it was a very hostile environment, just as Botswana was. All of them were intimidated by the Boers. But if we had managed to survive and establish ourselves in Swaziland, we would have had a more positive impact as MK as a whole.

### **What do you think were some of the weaknesses of Special Ops?**

Well, the strength was the identification of the targets and knowing the specifics about them. That was not done by us. Information came from the higher Command. And then people were trained thoroughly.

The weaknesses were not just with Special Ops, but MK as a whole; that there wasn't enough of an embrace from the people in the rural areas.

Then the ill-discipline and some vanish, as I said.

### **Were these units of Special Ops or other MK Units?**

Mostly in other MK units, but sometimes in Special Ops.

### **Why would they vanish?**

Because they go out of their hiding to look for liquor. Others would go out of their hiding to try and make contact with their families and that would compromise them.

### **How do you think the regime found out which operatives were behind the Sasol operation?**

Well, it was known Sasol was hit by a unit called Special Operations. I think the state had very extensive infiltration of all the structures of the ANC and (head of the apartheid's intelligence services) Neil Barnard confirmed that when we met him recently. But also the Sasol comrades boasted about what they did and it got to the police, I think.

Victor (Khayiyana) was in the Sasol group. He was the oldest. Victor would know all the *tsotsi* (gangster) ways of approaching the police and that would help them to get to Swaziland. Now when they reached Swaziland, I would take them to a safe house. I organised to go and fetch them. I only could do that after school because I was working. But these guys had come back with change (money left over from what they'd been given for the operation). I wouldn't demand the change back from them for Special ops. That is one of the things I used to quarrel with Rashid about.

I used to let them go and do their things before they go to Maputo. And Victor had a girlfriend from a long time ago. When I went to fetch them he was nowhere to be seen. So, Barney and them crossed (into Mozambique). So, I looked for Victor with another chap who was registered as a refugee, as a driver of Mabhida. Now we find Victor and tell him our instructions are to take him to the border.

But Victor comes in the car with a hand grenade, sits at the back, doesn't tell us (laughter). When I arrived towards the (Swaziland-Mozambique) border, the car radiator starts giving us trouble. Now, because we (Tommy Masinga and Nene) are both legally there, one of us takes Victor by foot, it was about nine or eight kilometres for him to cross. And then when we were back at the car, we say let's hide our AK's and go to the police station and get a can of water.

The police didn't know me, they knew Tommy (Masinga). They say to him, 'Hey, what do you want here at night?' So, we are busy talking to the station commander and a policeman decides to go to the car. Then he sees this hand grenade, which Victor did not tell us about - at the back, on the floor. So, they decide, no there's a bomb in the car. So, they said to me, 'we don't know you, we still have to verify you. You say you're a teacher?' I say yes. They say to Tommy, 'You, we know you. You go with us to the car and take out that hand grenade.' To me, they say, 'You, we are locking you in'.

When they lock me in, Tom goes to fetch the hand grenade, he arms the hand grenade and comes back. All the police run away from the police station and he wants to blow the door. I said no, the splinters are going to hurt me or I'm going to die, so the best thing you can do now I told him is cross the border (into Mozambique). The ANC will negotiate for my release. But make sure that when you have time, go where we have hidden our AK's.

So, that's a story that broke on Radio 604 in South Africa, that a former teacher, a very shy and quiet man, attacked the police station.

So, what I'm trying to say, is that those are some of the weaknesses in the sense that we had this Victor, he was the oldest comrade in that Special ops unit...

But other weaknesses sometimes arose from Angola. The jealousy amongst the younger comrades, oh no, but this one is not fit to be my Commander. But it was said that this is your Commander and respect him.

So, when they carry out an operation we hear when they come back that this one was trying to tell the Commander, no it has to be done this way, not that way. This was military ill-discipline.

**On criticisms of Special Ops, (ANC Military Intelligence member) Rocky Williams says that Special Ops was good because of the strategic economic and military targets it hit. But it also raised resentments because other MK structures were saying Special Ops was being given special attention by Tambo and Slovo and more resources. That it was being favoured.**

No, I wouldn't describe it as resentment. There was an inherent element of jealousy - that these ones are special, they are given special training and they are moved by the Cubans and Angolans away from the camps for this specialised training. Probably also, when the Special Ops comrades are about to leave, they tell their friends, I've done this and that, and I'm leaving now. That will create some jealousy.

Of course, a lot of resources had to be planted in Special Ops to carry out all these missions because they were not ordinary missions. They were special missions requiring a lot of resources. They also had to make sure that the operatives don't find themselves short of money.

And as I say, even within the Special Ops units there was also some jealousy.

### **What jealousy within a unit?**

As I said, there are people who'd say, no this one is not fit to be my Commander. And they wouldn't say it in Angola, they would say it either on the way back or on the way in and that would affect the authority of the Commanders.

**On the issue of Special Ops not sufficiently stimulating mass political struggles, what's your response? This was Rocky's view...**

No, the actions of Special Ops operators was not meant to target a specific political agenda, but was meant to raise the confidence of the people in the ANC for operations.

### **What do you know about the Church Street Air Force operation?**

There was a guy called Victor (Johannes) Mnisi. He's passed away now. Mnisi was part of Special Ops. He was part a group of 23 who were crossing from Mozambique to Swaziland and the Boers knew about it.

When we went to look for them they had scattered. So, Victor was one of those who managed to dodge the security network...This story's a bit long, but the long and short of it, is that Boers get hold of him - and de Kock had taken him away. The following day (Adriaan) Vlok (Law and Order Minister) himself came to interrogate and question Mnisi. They broke his arm, he went to hospital and all that. And he was sold out because he had contacted his friend wanting accommodation. And it was not the first time this friend of his had accommodated him. This is now what he says to me. So, Mnisi and his younger brother who was in the Transvaal Machinery, were transferred to Vlakplaas. When they are in Vlakplaas Victor finds a way, after some time, to send a message to a courier of mine that they are going to escape...

### **From Vlakplaas?**

Yes, they will tell us the details. They did escape. Now when they escaped, we felt this was a big operation, so I go to get Gebuza (Siphiwe Nyanda). One of our instructions was that you never go and receive someone at the border at night because you never know. So, we agree no we can't, this guy is clever, he can find himself his way out until he reaches Mbabane, and when he reaches Mbabane we shall have deployed ourselves, which we did.

Victor manages to cross and and he calls me to say I'm here in a plaza. So, when I go to see him, he says he's hungry. We go to the nearest restaurant. He tells me what happened. I got one of my guys to take him to the Mozambique border.

He went to OR (Tambo) to say he wants to prove that he's not working for the Boers. OR must allow him to go and carry out a one-man mission and he knows how he's going to do it. So, OR agrees.

He sees me the day he is leaving to carry out that mission, he says nobody knows about it, but the leadership has given me this chance, I'm going to prove myself.

**Was it just Tambo that was involved in sanctioning the attack on the Air Force or did it also involve JS?**

He said to me its OR.

**Was JS also involved?**

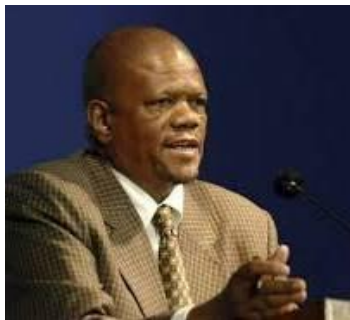
Maybe. He told me at the camp he went straight to OR and had a one-on-one.

**When you leave Swaziland, where do you go?**

To Mazimbu, the ANC school in Tanzania.

**Who takes over from you as Transitional Commander?**

No, I wouldn't know. When I leave one or two of my contacts are taken over by Gebuza. And when they say leave, you know, you find the safest way to leave without leaving a trace.



**George Nene, CSI**

**There are suggestions that you had some sort of fall out with Rashid and, therefore, left Special Ops, is this accurate?**

Me? Fall-out with Rashid? No. The only dispute, as I said, was he demanding that the operatives who came back from inside the country return the money that was left over, and I felt that they should keep it and use it for themselves...

So Mac Maharaj says to me Rashid is like a typical Indian shopkeeper.

**Was Rashid your Commander?**

Yes.

**But if there were tensions between you, so what? That would be perfectly understandable?**

It wasn't just Rashid, it was also Barney. He felt I was too kind to the soldiers that he was supposed to be commanding. He would say 'I don't know why they made you a Commander. These guys say they want this, you go out of your way...'

**It seems almost as if Special Ops begins to peter out around '84-'85 Is that so, and if so, why?**

Well, I left Swaziland '82. I wouldn't know the details, but I know it petered out around those times. I left Swaziland because the information we got was that de Kock used to go around Swaziland, to shebeens, bars and restaurants and ask people if they knew me and others. And the first one was Gebuza and the second would be me. Also, some brave Swazis who knew me came and whispered to me about this.

So, we began looking for de Kock and we found out that his favourite place in Swaziland was the George Hotel and he goes there at this and this time. So, we go to Mabhida, we plan an operation to assassinate de Kock. We order an assassin from the camps in Angola. De Kock parked his same car, at the same time, went into the bar, ordered a beer and didn't drink it. He went out through the back door and left the car there.

**Do you think he knew about your plan?**

I think he sensed that there was a strange car there at the hotel and a strange somebody.

**Could he have had information about the assassination plan?**

I don't know. Joe (who was to carry out the plan) leaves the scene, comes back to my flat, and points a gun at me. He wanted to send me out. I said no, why? He says, 'no man, your target came, but he just vanished. How did he know? Because you told me it's me, you and Mabhida who knows here in Swaziland...'

**So, do you think de Kock just sensed trouble ... Could he be that astute?...**

Yes, I think he was very astute. De Kock was shrewd, crude and rude, and very cruel. He'll kill you without any feeling.

I also had an encounter with him. '91, we were now allowed to come home. I was moving my ANC office...Comrade Moss takes me to town. Then he leaves me there. In my excitement I see Game, the supermarket. I'd never seen a Game before. So, I go in. When I come out, there were eight people waiting for me. Five of them I knew from Angola.

Apparently, they were following me in a Kombi. They took me away to a secret house where de Kock was. After a while, he said, 'Look George, you're a soldier, I'm a soldier, I'm instructed by my Commander to leave you and take you where

you are going.' So, I learnt later that some people saw what happened...and Mandela phoned de Klerk and told him that this thing must stop, release the guy today. Obviously, I refused the lift. I walked that night to Soweto. I thought the taxis were still operating but it was too late. And the trains finish at twelve.

***The interview was meant to be continued on another date but, sadly, George Nene died on 7 April 2018, before it could be done.***