

MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

George Tate Sibanyoni

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Delmas

Cde Tate, let's start with your personal details...

My name is George Kolozi Sibanyoni. In the camps in Angola, I was known as Andrew Gwebu. I also had other names, depending on which country I was in. When I was in Mozambique, I was called Tate. So, the name Tate stuck on my neck until today.

Who influenced you politically? Was it your parents, your siblings, your schoolmates or who?

Let me tell you this comrade, nobody influenced me; I was influenced by the situation of South Africa. I came from a poor family. My father was a bricklayer, my mother used to work in the kitchen of White people just like our grandmas. I had five brothers and two sisters. When we were growing up, we didn't have enough money. I used to work as a gardener just to collect some few pennies. I earned only R1.50 for a day. I am telling you that because of the treatment that I used to get from Afrikaners. We used to work for them but they were not treating us well, you know, and you could see that there's something wrong with the Whites. So I had my own thinking about all this.

Then what happened around June 16th, actually it didn't come as a surprise to me – because this is what everybody actually waited for, and we joined the rest who were protesting. So, in 1976 everything changed really.

There was a gentleman called Richard Chauke. He used to come to my neighbour's place, discussing politics, sitting around. I used to hear about what was happening and about the guys who left the county. So, myself, Bra Saki (Isaac Maphanga), Dladla Patrick Mahlangu, and Bheki Maseko decided we must join them. And we were later briefed that if we want to leave the country, they can help us, especially, Bra Richard Chauke because he was a member of the ANC. So, he took us through the process. And then we left the country in January 1977 when the schools were open. By then we already heard that Solomon Mahlangu and the others had already left. We are from one place, myself and Solomon Mahlangu – from Mamelodi.

Anyway, the four of us went to Nelspruit and then we crossed the border guided by Chauke. We managed to cross through to Mozambique.

Did you cross the fence?

Yes, we crossed the fence into Mozambique as guided by Chauke. We reached where there was a station and we took a train from there to the Maputo station. We reported ourselves to the police that we are here to join the ANC, and then they took us to prison anyway. We stayed in prison, it was not nice, there was no food for us, and we were treated badly, honestly, but later we were taken out of the prison to a refugee camp. Remember, that time it was a war in Zimbabwe. ZIPRA (Zimbabwe Peoples' Revolutionary Army) and ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) were fighting the (Ian) Smith regime. And then later there were these Lancaster House talks to have a democracy in Zimbabwe.

We stayed with the Shonas in that in that area of the Memo camp. That area actually was not a nice place really. They forced us to work there on a rice farm. We didn't even have nice clothes. So, we decided that we can't work in these types of conditions and we were there really because we came to join the ANC. So, we ran away from that place. Patrick Mahlangu managed to cross back to South Africa and was arrested and then later released.

We were arrested and were taken back to the very same Memo camp after we had traveled 75 kilometres away from it. We really were forced to work there. Then they moved us from that Memo area to Maputo. We stayed there for a few days and then they flew us to Tanzania – Bra Saki and I.

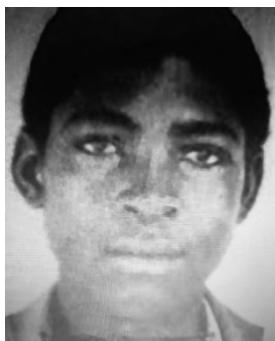
Bra Saki was selected to do a medical course and he became a dentist.

Bra Saki and Bheki Maseko later joined us in Angola.

Also, these other guys I'm talking about are late also.

How long were you in Tanzania?

If I recall very well, I think six months.



George Tate
Sibanyoni, 1980s

Do you then move to Angola? Where to?

I was in Luanda and then from there to Quibaxe for guerilla training. We were trained by our own people who had been trained already. We were then grouped into sections and platoons. Later we were taken by the Cubans to (Novo) Catengue in the south of Angola. That's where we had proper training.

What training did you get?

Normal guerilla training for six months. I also read the books there that were requirements by the ANC National Executive Committee and OR Tambo. Also, I learnt about those actions that were required to have a base to develop a guerilla formation that can be a force that can start doing armed propaganda. That was the solution actually. The Cubans were mainly training us in Catengue. We were also given specialised training based on the Vietnamese experience of their war of liberation against the Americans in the 1970s.

We learned a lot there from them. We completed our course, if I remember well, in 1979. We had the June 16th detachment. I was belonging to the Moncada detachment. We were given that name because we were part of those who were trained by the Cubans. We learnt about all the tactics of the Fidel Castro guerrillas

OR (Tambo) came to the camp in the week of our graduation where we took an oath. Everybody took an oath and after that our experience was that the regime saw that the Novo Catengue camp was producing soldiers that could become a threat. So, the regime attacked the base. But we already had the instruction given to everybody that by six o'clock we must vacate the base. Everybody must go outside the base and lay around. It's only my section that remained inside because that week we were doing duties. I was a section Commander by then.

So, the base was actually destroyed, buildings were destroyed. One Cuban was killed during that bombardment. There's a comrade who was on duty. He was responsible for small arms training and an instructor. He was there to ensure that he gives a warning if an attack is about to happen. He must ring that bell and alert everybody but he couldn't even reach that bell because the attack was so quick. He was hit behind by a machine gun and another comrade was hit by a splinter. He was trying to enter the guard house next to the kitchen. He could feel something heavy in his back. Another comrade, Patrick Nxesi was injured in his private parts. But all those guys were taken to the nearest hospital in Benguela and they were fine. But the base, after that bombardment, was not right.

So which base did you go to after that?

We went to Quibaxe.

And what did you do there?

Remember everybody got general training. And you're trained as a fighter so that if you are infiltrated inside the country, you can be able to train our own people there. There were also Commissars in the camps who taught us the whole politics of the ANC. And that has helped us a lot in guiding most of the members who joined Umkhonto we Sizwe.

We didn't know about the ANC in great detail but once we were there and told about the history of the ANC that's when we realised that it's correct that we joined the ANC.

Before you took part in the 1990 attack on the Braklaagte military base operation in Bophuthatswana, did you come into the country to carry out any other operation?

No actually.

So, who recruited you into Special Ops and why?

I was part of the group that was taken to Russia in 1984 to do the underground intelligence course. They called it Military Combat Work. I was there for 10 months. I

became an engineering instructor in 1985-86 in Malanje. Before that I also did other services, also as a driver. Then I was requested to go and join the team of instructors by Bra Timothy. General Nkabinde (Vusi Mthombeni), Raymond Mdutyhana and others – about 20 – and me were taken to Russia from '86 to '88 for formal conventional warfare training.

Tommy Masinga (Lester Dumakude) recruited me into Special Ops. He was the Special Ops Commander. Vusi (Ernest Pule) was also there. There was also a White guy, Akino (Hein Grosskopf). Then there was (Johannes) Mnisi. I was appointed as a special planner. After we finished our training in Russia, some of us were deployed in Special Ops. I also went into Special Ops because of the late Chris Hani.

So tell me a bit about the Braklaagte operation. Why did you target it?

The people of that area were complaining about the government of (Bophuthatswana leader, Lucas) Mangope. They were being troubled by the security forces there. They were tired of Mangope. So we decided to attack that military base. We did the reconnaissance. We wanted to show the mass of the people that we were there for them. I don't want to sound racist but we mainly wanted to hit the White soldiers there.

You crossed the border into South Africa with Makwale Nyalunga, Aaron Mkhwanazi (Take Five) and Mandla. Ernest Pule was your Commander. What did you do exactly after you crossed the border?

When I reached Botswana myself, I didn't know Take Five. But I started to get knowing him. We were tasked together to go and infiltrate there. Take Five knew the area well. We went in and then we stayed at the house of the Molokoane family. Not Barney's family. But after a few days they felt by us staying there we were putting him under pressure. So we decided to split. Take Five said I better go to live with one of the other families there where there was an old man called Dali. So, they took me to his sister's house. I wanted to stay there myself. Take Five took me to that place because they knew him and then he went to wherever he went. I don't know where he was staying but he was around also. So, from there I started moving from Dali's sister's house to come and meet that old man Dali. I started doing reconnaissance myself there. I took the operation money to fix that old man's car. He went to buy all the rings and bearings and tubes for the wheels and then the car was fine. The only transport we had was the old man's. We used his car to go and fetch the other comrades at the border to bring the ammunition inside the country and the weapons.

We loaded the ammunition and we drove through on the road of Mangope's house. Our vehicle got stuck just next to the house of Mangope and that place was being patrolled. The guys hid themselves in the bushes with all the ammunition and weapons, which they buried there. Dali and I fixed the car. We had to drive back. It wasn't safe to continue because of the patrols. Imagine you have reached about a kilometre from your place, but then you have to drive back for about 20 kilometres.

Unfortunately, the car because of the load couldn't manage as we were driving in an area where there were a lot of thorn-type of trees. So, we had to push the car. We had to stay there that night – all of us. We had load that ammunition – the mortar base. Ooh, I don't want that night again, I'm telling you! We had to bury all those things that night. We were really very tired.

There was somebody who was supposed to assist us that day -but he was not there. Take Five was not there. He was sleeping. Maybe he forgot that we were supposed to sort out the accommodation. But we managed to take the ammunition with the others to Dali's place. We also went to Molokoane's shouse. But there were too many of us and we moved to an alternative base. That base was the place where we were did the reconnaissance. I went there with the son of Dali's sister. There was a gentleman who was staying there and he took us to a farm. We made that place the base for staging the operation. And then later, because we didn't have transport, part of the plan was to take a vehicle from a civilian and we used that car to load everything that we had, and went to the target.

Before we reached that target we stopped somewhere and prepared ourselves and loaded the ammunition. As we were moving closer, plus or minus 40 metres from the target, a patrol vehicle was driving out of the base. Realising that that vehicle was inconveniencing us, we stopped next to one of the houses nearby. The patrol vehicle came straight to us. Without wasting our time, we crossed past it. We drove past the base thinking they are not going to follow us, but they turned quickly and they began pursuing us. We stopped – and that's where everything happened. The patrol vehicle was stormed.

How many police were killed in that exchange of gunfire?

To be honest, I didn't know how many people were in that vehicle. We couldn't even reach that base there, because already everybody was alerted with the gunfire.

Pule said at the TRC that four policemen were killed and he apologised for that.

It's true, because remember when they patrolling, I they're not only one guy.

So, after 1990, briefly, what happens to you?

After that operation we left the vehicle around the border. I then got a message from Zambia. I was told to report back and was sent to Russia.

How long were you in Russia then?

I was there actually in 1990-91. We came back because of the coup there. (Boris) Yeltsin took over. I was in Russia in total for six years. I went back now recently as a defence attache and spent four years there.

With the integration into the SADF, I did all my training courses as recommended. Remember in Russia I did my college training. College is a smaller institution in Russia.

The Academy is the highest institution. I was trained in the college. I did the Academy when I went there for this armour training and the other group did infantry combined training. When we came back, I integrated into the SADF and I was given the rank of a Lt Colonel and later I had to upgrade and undergo different courses, including the Company Commander's course, weapons training and a lot more.

When do you leave the SANDF?

The SANDF, I took pension in 2018.

And what have you been doing since then?

You know, I'm sitting at home actually.

What do you think of where the ANC and the country are now?

Well, you know, we are always listening to stories and there are many things I can mention but we need time to discuss this. But lot of mistakes were made by our comrades but not taking away the factor of infiltration. What I've learned is that the ANC is highly infiltrated. We did not have an honest comrade in the leading this organisation. Our people had really serious hope in the ANC but part of it, we all know, is that since we took over, there there's not a day when there's no issue about the ANC – propaganda against our organisation. It was an overload for the leaders and they couldn't handle it. I am talking about anything done by the ANC was not praised actually; it was discouraged. Then the divisions that came in our organisation and some opened up their own organisations. The strictness of the organisation was not there and they did not have enough people to vet their new members.