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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Harold Bangry Matshididi and Aggie Billy Shoke

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A bit about yourselves, please? Your family history? How you got into politics?

Matshididi (M): My name is Harold Bangry Matshididi and my combat name is Malambo. I was born on 7 June 1947 in Mafikeng.

My mother passed away in 1950. I was sent to my uncle's place in Athlone in Cape Town. Then there came forced removals. Now people were taken to Gugulethu. Then I was sent back to my father – but he was staying with another woman.

I started schooling at about eight years. Then my father died and then my stepmother. So, I stayed with my sister in Alexandra. I went to school there until Standard 3. Then forced removals once again. We went to Diepkloof. It was still dull. There were just a few houses. I went to school and I couldn't go much further. My sister got her own children and now I had to fend for myself at that age – about 13-14 years old. I was living an adult life. I had to work at the golf course, buy myself shoes, school books, uniform and all that. It was too much. I couldn't go on like this. I left school at 16. I was in Standard 4.

Then I had to hustle for myself. How do I survive in all those things? Under those conditions? It was bad.

The struggle came into my system at a very early stage because we were suffering at the time and we were not working and we did some other activities and you find that you get arrested and criminally charged. So, you spend a lot of time in jail. But I remember the uprising of 1976 when I was in Leeuwkop. The prison authorities decided no more visits from outside for us. We were so impressed about what we were hearing about what was happening outside.

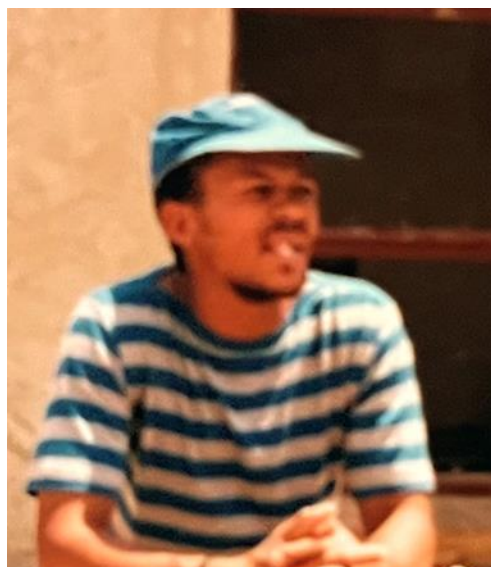
But the children were getting slaughtered and as parents inside we were very concerned. We felt we had to go home.

When we got released, we said, we can't just look at our kids doing all these things, without our participation. We found that our kids have been removed from school.

You hear these things, the ANC has done one, two, three, but you can't talk about the ANC. People were afraid. It could be death. But in the end what do I do, you say? No, I've got no choice, I've got no life. Let me look for a way out. Then you find yourself getting into this thing to say let me leave the country. But it was difficult to get out of the country and join the ANC.

But I learnt the routes about how to cross the boundary into Botswana. Later, when we started recruiting people to cross over, we knew which route to use to Botswana.

We must do something. So, we got involved with the MK soldiers in our location. So, when the leadership came up with the idea of saying, 'this is too much, comrades, all these murders only happen in locations, and it is time now to take the struggle to the white community,' and we felt that now this is the right thing. We said this makes sense because it's only our kids and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers that are slaughtered here. Hence, we later picked Ellis Park. Not to kill whites. But to send them a message. We can come into your areas. Take us seriously. Talk to us.



Harold Matshididi in his youth

Shoke (S): I was born on 20 December 1954. Our mother died when I was 10. So, we were left with our father and the five boys. My father was working at the butchery. He got an early pension. So, we were struggling. Coming back from school there was no food sometimes.

So, I left school in Standard 6.

My brother, Solly, went into exile. He was in the G5 unit of MK. He later became the Chief of the SANDF.

I was arrested for politics and then released. When I came out, Solly was already out of the country. The police came and harassed us at home always looking for him. Kicking the

doors, pointing guns at us, screaming 'hey where is this guy?'. It was too bad. I decided I must do something.

So, in the early 1980s I went to Botswana for military training, for a crash course. Ernest Pule and Tommy Masinga (Lester Dumakude) supervised. I was sent back into the country where I teamed up with Bangry (Matshididi).

How did you initially meet Bangry?

S: No, we grew up together in Diepkloof. Our houses were not far from each other.

Were you based inside the country, not in Botswana and coming into South Africa to carry out operations?

M: We were based inside. (Itumeleng) Dube came first and Lester after.

Who decided on the actual targets?

S: Lester will say 'because you are inside the country you are more informed than myself.'

M: Yes, 'you do the reconnaissance and then you'll inform me when we come.' And when he comes in the country, we must provide a safe house. When he's here, first thing in the morning we will pick him up and show him the targets we checked out beforehand. And then he says 'alright drop me a sketch and then we'll take it from there.'

How did you connect with Dube?

M: Dube's situation, it's quite a sensitive one – because he was all over the place, and we didn't officially meet with him; we met him in a very strange way. We see him in the shebeens and that's how we met with Sputla (Dube). He told us that he's in the struggle one, two, three and all those things and that's how we got involved with him. He introduced us to Lester and Pule and told us he's got a unit assembled in Soweto.

So, Dube was effectively like the operational commander of the unit inside the country?

Yes.

Who were the others in the unit?

M: Two 6 (Victor Kgaladi) and Take 5 (Aaron Mkhwanazi). We started mixing with them. And then we became fully-fledged members of MK. When we went to Botswana, they organised safe houses for us. We collected material from them. There was also Madala Leonard Chabedi – he is also late.

And Kali? What was his role?

M: He supplied comrades with material for operations and safe houses. But Lester didn't want Kali to appear physically with comrades from time to time. Pius Anthony Christopher was his real name. He was also a teacher in Lesotho for a time. He was from Sri Lanka.

So, what was the first operation you were involved in and when?

M: There was always a stationary police car when you enter the township, where there are garages, and those cars were troubling our comrades. We spotted one at the corner of Immink Road and the Soweto highway in Diepkloof.

Billy was driving and we came to a robot. The garage is just opposite us. We opened the bonnet. We had four AK47's. We fired at the police and drove off and took the AK's and ammunition out and dumped the car as it was stolen, a hot car.

The following day we came there as spectators. 'Hey what have they done? This is bad, man, why did they do this?' We heard there were casualties. But we didn't know what and how many.

I think this was in the second quarter of 1988. We reported to Botswana in code.

We had a white BMW hot car and we used to also chase the police cars. Some of them heard about this car. And every time when they see this white BM they will pass with speed.

But why would they be afraid of you? Why not arrest you?

M: They know we have more fire-power. They got only 9mm.

S: They were afraid.

So, after the attack on the police car?

S: There was a time in Mozambique, the South African forces bombed a creche. That made me very angry. We wanted to do the same thing. But the commander Lester, said 'no. we mustn't go for the underage'. He stopped us. He said 'the ANC will throw us in Quatro (the ANC detention centre in Angola)' if we do that. He said 'look for other targets. Bring sketches of them. Then we can talk.'

M: So, the we thought of Leeuwkop. I was there. I knew the place. Every December, mainly on Sundays, the warders have braais and parties at the hall and a braai. And the generals come.

S: And the President

M: We went to Leeuwkop to visit an inmate there, a comrade, and we checked the place out. The comrade showed us where the President parks. This comrade had some duties there and he could move around more freely and the white warders didn't bother us with any questions when he took us there. And we worked out where we could park the car with a bomb and we found a place we could cut the fence and leave. There would be a 15 to 20 minutes' walk – from the hall to the fence. We worked out the time and from where we can detonate the bomb. We gave Lester the sketch. And Dube also came.

S: We also thought Newlands police station is a good target. There's a stadium next to it. We did a sketch. Even John Vorster was in the pipeline. We gave the sketches of these two places to Lester.

But we also thought of Ellis Park. We did a sketch and then discussed it with comrades Dube and Dumakude. So, we decided together let's do this first.

So, we got everything ready. The Thursday before the Saturday (2 July 1988) of the match we got the car for the bomb.

From somebody called Boykie?

M: Yes, Gcabashe

Was he dealing in stolen cars?

S: Yes, it was still a new BMW. Lester gave us the money. These people used to sell cars for R300 but we gave them R1000. We were the best buyers (laughter). We shoved the car at our safe house in Zola. On the Friday, we got two big gas cylinders, the clocks, remotes. But we still needed to assess if they work, what the distance should be and all that.

M: Then Saturday morning came; and we went to Zone 5 to assemble the explosives. The boot was packed with everything.

Dumakude said he had set the wires from the boot through the back seat by the gears where he was going to put the clock.

Billy was driving his Kombi taxi. We were two-two. Billy was escorting Dube and I went with Lester in the BMW. We drove until Doornfontein, near the *Beeld* printing factory close to Ellis Park.

We parked our cars – and said things must go on. They said, 'because Bangry (Matshididi) and Lester, you are planting the bomb, do the last inspection.'

We went on foot to check where are we going to park the car. We found the spot and said, gents, we are fine, and we'll meet with them later in Springbok Street in Hillbrow. Near the Checkers. That's a few minutes away from the rugby.

We went to park the car with the bomb. We were disguised as chauffeurs. I got out. Lester remained in the car connecting the bomb. I pretend I'm dusting the car. I see the security guys playing soccer just the other side of the stadium. But at the TRC they don't say that. They say they couldn't allow any black person to go into that parking place. It was Grosskopf that did that (the bombing). That's a lie. And I told the TRC chairperson I have never met Grosskopf.

Lester connected everything fine. The timer was set for ten to five (16:50). Whites are putting the apartheid government in power and the colonels that attend these matches. That's why we wanted to go there. So, these colonels' wives will say, 'you see now, these people are coming into our areas, next time they're going to kill us. They are many. It's not worth it.'

S: Yes, we were sending a message.

M: I think because time is clicking, we must go. I had a ball. The plan was also that I must pretend like I'm playing football while he is busy in the car, in case anybody got suspicious. But when I looked again, I don't see Lester. I looked at my time. I see that

time is running out and this thing will hit me if I stay there. So, I start running fast now as if I'm chasing this ball.

Then the whole of Doornfontein shook. I'm seeing these ambulances. And the policemen coming. They've already got the message.

I reached Billy and Dube and they said, 'Bangry, where's Lester?' And really what do I say? I don't know where Lester went, he just vanished. Now what do we do? I said no, let's get out of this area because there are going to be roadblocks. Now I'm a bit worried. But then, here he comes out of the building, 'hey gents'..."

And then Lester sent a message to the comrades outside in code about the operation done.

Who did Lester communicate with? Pule? Hani?

M: We don't know. Not Pule. He didn't know about this operation.

Pule said he knew that Lester was inside the country and was looking for a high-profile target. But he didn't know about Ellis Park.

M: Ja.

But to a key question: why the inconsistencies in the accounts given by the two of you and Dumakude at the TRC and now the new information coming from you?

It was like a court process. We are not used to that. The differences that might be there came out because of that process. But we know what happened, and we tried to explain that.

We didn't prepare properly for that process. We didn't know what to expect.

And that thing in the TRC about when Dumakude met us in Hillbrow, I didn't think that was important, I just gave the TRC, like, a simple summary of what happened, as I remembered it. But you can't remember everything right.

But now when you talk to us like this, for long, and not like a lawyer, it is easier to remember more things, and what I said to you today is correct.

I don't know what really happened there at the TRC, but I must say, we definitely didn't want to just go and kill whites. Sometimes when the army is killing black people, you feel like you want to do that. But you don't actually do it. Because one day you will have to live with them. And the ANC policy was you can't just go and kill whites...

S: Ya, absolutely. Nobody in the ANC went everywhere to go and kill whites. If the ANC wanted to do that, we could have done that. But as you know, we never did that.

So, after Ellis Park?

M: But at about 6:00pm there used to be a fleet of casspirs coming into Diepkloof – about 10 to 12. We said that's our target, and we went to get our materials in the DLB (dead letter box). Lester and Dube were there. We rushed back and when they were on the main street, we were driving parallel with them in a 1400 van. When we came to Zondi Garage at Khwezi, they turned off and went to a mountain area where there are some rocks.

Lester said 'we can't attack them there. We must attack them from front.' With the Bazooka he'll fire at the casspirs and they will explode. And then we must fire with our AK47 to get rid of them.

Then the casspirs moved further towards Zola and we followed. But we didn't have enough ammunition with us. So, we went to our safe house in Zola where we hid our ammunition. We picked this up. Unfortunately, when we got back, there was a police van there and they looked suspiciously at us. But they were not our target, we wanted those soldiers. We parked at a T-junction. The commander gave instructions that he'll fire three shells and the casspirs will explode. Then you start firing and cause confusion and then we get out of the area.

When the police came, they were already informed to look out for a white BM. They just came for us. We were surprised. We were off guard. When Lester tried to shoot them, the thing jammed. I had already taken a position behind the car. I had a small pistol 38. There was a lot of confusion. But the other comrades managed to get out of the area on foot. I suddenly saw I was alone. I had no chance against four or five of them. I decided not to shoot. They got me. I was arrested.

When they interrogated me, these people thought I'm Gebuza.

Why?

M: My face, the lighter skin. That's all.

The main thing that was scaring them was the Bazooka. 'Hey, you know this thing can start a war?' Now I'm with these people alone, can you imagine what I went through? Well, I won't start to say they did this and that. You know the stories of everybody being tortured. You can't tell them nothing. I didn't mention Lester and Dube. I mentioned Billy and Madala. He's late. We attended his funeral near Pietersburg.

The police said 'you are the one killing Boers here'. I said 'no I don't know about that.' My mission was John Vorster Square. They said 'how are you going to attack John Vorster?' Now I tell them here by John Vorster, there is a public telephone. The strategy was that we were going to be there ready to act. Two comrades will be in a car. One will shoot three shells at John Vorster, then I will shoot and jump into the car.

And they took my story. But that was all lies (laughter). I just built it up there (laughter) and they believed me. They wanted to know 'how you planned that?' I said, no, I've got a sketch. I pass by John Vorster every day.

There was also another guy with us – Edward Mokati. He planted a bomb in Vanderbijl Park. We had planned to dump the cars in the basement of a parking building as these were hot cars.

Mokati was also arrested there; he was within our unit.

When the police arrested him, he said I'm (Matshididi) 'talking nonsense; we didn't have that in our operation.'

Mokati is late.

So, when do you appear in court?

M: I was in detention for two years, but my last five months I spent in Johannesburg hospital because I was injured very bad.

S: He tried to commit suicide.

M: That did come out. I confessed that I was with Billy in the operation, and they captured him also, but fortunately he was released. They didn't have enough evidence. I was convicted to eight years for sabotage and three years for having a(n) unlicensed firearm. I was sent to Robben Island

What about your role in Ellis Park?

M: They didn't know about that.

Fortunately. Otherwise, you'd have got a stiffer sentence as two people died in that operation?



Harold Mashididi in the 1980s

M: Ja

Billy, what happened to you with your arrest?

S: They tortured me very badly. They wanted me to admit that I was with Bangry. They even tortured my brother, electric shocks. They nearly killed me. I told them they better kill me because I know nothing.

Did you get involved in operations after you were released?

S: That time I went underground a bit and waited.

Special Ops aim was to focus on high profile economic and military target – like Sasol, the

power stations, Voortekkerhoogte and so on. You did operations on Ellis Park and the police and tried to hit casspirs. How were your operations related to the aims of Special Ops?

My understanding was that the head of state and his generals might be in attendance. It was commonly known that rugby matches were mostly attended by army generals, prime ministers and high-ranking members of the police force. And it was the aim of Special Ops to hit high profile targets like this.

Bangry, when did you get released?

M: February 1990. When we came out, we wanted to mobilise people because we wanted the country back for the people. Everybody was an ANC member. Now we are busy, we attended meetings and everything, Madiba, Chris Hani, everybody.

After 1994 we told them we are not working and we are so many. Madiba said 'the only thing we can do for you comrades is to become policemen and soldiers.' And we said Madiba, no man, you must be missing something in your head. We were very concerned. How can we go and work with these people? And he convinced us – because the old man, he was too clever. He said 'you know what, comrades you fought for this freedom, you must now defend it'. And he got us there. We couldn't argue. The ANC said, 'next Wednesday we're going to take all your fingerprints.'

Now people like myself we have this previous conviction for crime. I can't become a policeman. I spoke with Billy but he was running a taxi, he was busy on the road.

S: I worked in the private sector.

M: And then we went to Shell House, we took fingerprints and the next week they started calling us, they deployed us, we started working with the Tokyos (Sexwale) of this country and you name them, bodyguarding and all, we are policemen, but they called us temporary constables. Within two months they said that Harold Bangry Matshididi, 'you are convicted, you can't be a police officer'.

But they should have written off that record...

M: Yes, I went to some of the comrades, and said their law is, if you stay clean for 10 years your record doesn't apply anymore. And with immediate effect, (Police Minister) Sydney Mufamadi said 'reinstate this man' – and that's how I got back to work. I worked for the SAPS for 13 years.

The wrong thing again that our government did was that the people who were doing the ranking of the police were the Boers, and I ended up only as a captain. When we retired, when we went for pension, they said there's a mistake. We must be re-ranked. I should have been ranked higher. My pension was worth almost nothing. The matter is still not sorted out. We submitted all the documents. But now the trade union of the Boers is opposing the re-ranking. And we are stuck there.

Really, we are looking at our government with a very wry face to say all the promises that they made to the veterans didn't happen. Yes, we didn't go to the struggle to get rewards, but we were told after '94 we'll be given some things. Other countries, when their soldiers came back after they won the struggle, they get a pat behind their backs. In Europe, for example, the war veterans are well-off.

I don't have a car now. Ever since the car got into water, I can't afford to fix it. I'm not blaming the government. But recently (former Deputy President) D D Mabuza said we will start getting more. He went off. Now, it's quiet. (Defence Minister) Thandi Modise came in. We asked when is this thing starting? She just literally said 'I don't know.' Now there's this danger, something bad is going to happen, our government, our ANC is going to be knocked out of power in the elections. Then what's going to happen to the veterans? Do you think any other party, the DA, will consider veterans?

But at same time, I always say to Billy, we got to blame ourselves also. You know comrades are selfish, comrades are greedy. A lot of people who were not in MK are claiming benefits. And they are being brought in by real MK people, who claim that these people worked with them. But that's not true.

The lady from the Department of Military Veterans, she said to us once, 'right now I've got 32,000 applicants and unattended I've got 16,000.' I was receiving a special pension but when I retired on my pension, they deducted a lot in taxes.

But, as I said, it's not that we're demanding to be rich. We just want to be treated fairly. We are liberation soldiers. And now it's 30 years since democracy. How long are we still going to wait to get fairness?

Yes, that's a fair point. And it's unfortunate that military combatants are treated like this. It's an indictment of the ANC and the government...

M: Yes.

S: Ja.