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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Jeremy Brickhill

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Harare, Zimbabwe (telephonically)

Tell us a bit about yourself. How you came to be politically involved and what your role was in the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe? And, since Zimbabwe became a democracy?

Very briefly, I'm Zimbabwean and became involved in politics in South Africa as a first-year student at the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal. Initially I was involved in NUSAS (National union of South African Students) politics and later made some connections with some comrades in the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).

I moved to Durban in 1974 when the FRELIMO rally took place. Joan, my partner, who was a newspaper reporter, and I made contact with people like (BCM leaders) Strini Moodley, Saths Cooper and others. We also met some ANC comrades like Roley Arenstein and other underground activists, and through them and SASO (South African Students' Organisation), we got into contact with some FRELIMO youth leaders who crossed into South Africa to prepare for that rally. I was also involved in the Wages Commission with Harriet Bolton, David Hemson and David Davis. So, my early political activism was over two years in South Africa.

But after the FRELIMO rally, to cut a long story very short, Joan and I had to go underground and skip the country to Mozambique, where a FRELIMO transitional government had just come to power. I tried to make contact with the Zimbabwean liberation movements, but it wasn't possible, and for various reasons we couldn't stay.

So we left for London where Joan and I very quickly became part of the ANC exile community. We were the first of the new exiles of the '70s and the first of the exiles to arrive in London with knowledge of Black Consciousness which was a bit of a difficult issue for the ANC at the time.

I worked for the International Defence and Aid Fund with Alan Brooks. We together wrote *The Whirlwind before the Storm* after the Soweto uprising.

Joan and I were very fortunate indeed to get to know some of the great iconic stalwarts of the South African struggle, like (ANC leaders) Yusuf Dadoo, James Phillips, Aziz Pahad and Ronnie Kasrils. We also went to Marxist study classes.

That was a really rich struggle learning experience with some really strong, experienced comrades. In late 1976 I joined ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) and volunteered to serve in ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, Zapu's armed wing). And Joan, as a South African, got involved in the ANC and was sent to the GDR (German Democratic Republic) for training.

I joined the National Security Organisation (NSO) – the security and intelligence section of ZIPRA – headed by the late Dumiso Dabengwa. I went to Zambia for training and was deployed in the intelligence directorate running special operations, and in 1978 I was promoted to head a new directorate involved in preparing the ZIPRA Zero Hour final offensive plan and other things.

Then came the Lancaster agreement (British-convened negotiations that led to democracy in Zimbabwe), and I returned home as one of the four directors of the NSO. Shortly after the 1980 elections and when it became apparent how things were going to go, Dabengwa instructed me to dismantle the intelligence network that I had built up over years - but requested that I continue doing secret work and build a network to support MK and the ANC. I agreed

I was a part of what was obviously a network, but I had no other knowledge of it other than my direct relationship with Dabengwa. He was an extremely methodical and highly professional, effective intelligence commander, and was extremely careful about everything.

So, I had very specific instructions to recruit operatives who could assist us to obtain information about threats from South Africa, and, secondly, provide intelligence information to the ANC and MK. In mid-1981, I was also instructed to cache weapons for MK by Dabengwa, and I established arms caches in Bulawayo and then Salisbury. I was also instructed to find safe houses and various other facilities for the ANC underground operatives and MK.

I now know, in hindsight, that I was one of several ZIPRA operatives carrying out this kind of work.



Jeremy Brickhill with MK Commander

Jeremy Brickhill with MK Commander Joe Modise
one way or the other.

How did you become connected to Rodney Wilkinson and Heather Gray who carried out the Koeberg operation as part of MK's Special Operations Unit?

It was the intelligence network that I built that linked us to Rodney. One of my intelligence operatives reported to me the arrival of a young couple who were trying to make contact with the ANC, and were quite an unusual type of exile. Not very obviously political, no real political background, but were interesting. I told the operative to try and get more information and she reported back with more details, which were not conclusive

We were obviously well aware that the apartheid regime was planting people in the exile community, so we were very cautious, and this was a very tense time in Zimbabwe, I think Joe Gqabi was assassinated around then, and there were bombings and other attacks on ANC exiles. There were former security operatives from the Rhodesian regime working with the apartheid regime. They were monitoring South African exiles, they may have picked up Rodney's and Heather's interests in meeting the ANC, so I had to be cautious.

So I decided to engineer an innocuous social event where this operative introduced me to Rodney. I met him for the first time in a social context and we contrived a situation where I'd be alone with him, actually we went to get some beer from a local beer hall, and on the way, I gave him a very general introduction to who I was.

Rodney and Heather at that time had no understanding of ANC structures, so I was able to introduce myself quite innocuously as a key connection to the ANC. What is it that you've got here? What are you trying to do? It was at that

meeting and a subsequent one, that I got to know that he worked in Koeberg, and that this was actually a potentially very interesting contact.

I told Dabengwa that this is a very unusual kind of guy. He's a bit of a hippie. And my worry was that he was mixing too openly with South African exiles and would get exposed. So, I suggested to Dabengwa that I recruit Rodney. This recruitment was really a false flag operation as I didn't recruit him into ZIPRA but on the basis that I was an ANC contact. Essentially, I was trying to extract him from the exile, especially the hippie, commune-type environment in which he was.

At that time there weren't many senior ANC people in Zimbabwe because ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) wasn't keen on this and they had stronger links with the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress). So, we didn't have access to our usual ANC contacts.

We needed to send a message to the ANC to send somebody to Zimbabwe to meet Rodney and, in the meantime, we had to stop him from talking to everybody.

Over several meetings with Rodney, it became clear that he had some document and I asked him for it to pass it on, but he hesitated for some time.

The recruitment involved a kind of preliminary training and orientation process, and it was at that point that I involved Joan, my wife. She was unaware of the ZIPRA underground network because we were very careful on the need-to-know principle not to give each other information that could endanger the other.

So, with Joan, I simply presented it as Rodney and Heather needing to be connected to the ANC. We treated the discussions as a kind of social thing which also enabled me to go with Joan into that kind of exile hippie environment

Joan was pretty well known as ANC, and ran the ANC radio station here. She had connections, though not very close, with that kind of environment and she assisted me to go to this house, where Rodney and Heather lived, which had all sorts of other people there, and we drank beer in the garden.

We were taking the two of them through a recruitment orientation and training program without making it obvious in the exile community. The orientation was the usual political history of the ANC, going through documents like the Freedom Charter and the security elements of military combat work training, which dealt with surveillance, counter-surveillance, techniques for this, and so

on. An important part was to try to get them to learn how to be discreet, and to wait, as I tried to get them in contact with a senior ANC person. I got them to move out of that house.

We sent a message to the ANC to please urgently send somebody to Harare, we have a very important possibility for you here. But it took time, and no one could get permission to arrive, and they kept saying somebody would come and nobody did.

My late brother Paul, also in NSO, who was doing other things for Dumiso, arranged a safe house, which we first used for training, and then moved Rodney and Heather into.

But Rodney was never a very good student of politics (laughter), though we managed basically to contain him. The training programme was very difficult because Rodney was incredibly impatient. Just like the Soweto students - we absorbed them into our ZIPRA training facilities in Zambia, and they'd all arrived with this idea of we have come for the weekend for military training and then we are going to go back and kill the Boers.

Rodney was very impatient, very naïve, very idealistic.

I insisted on the document he had, and he provided it in his unusual fashion by tossing it into the house through a window. I couriered the document out of the country to Mac (Maharaj).

Where was Mac based when he got the document?

I don't know. We used an intelligence connection to reach him. The document was sent to various people to authenticate. I briefed Mac when he came to Harare and then set up the first meeting with Rodney. And then said to Mac, I am handing him over to you now.

Mac was sceptical because Rodney and Heather were very unusual, they were hippies, not your typical left-wing whites. Afterwards Mac debriefed me and said this is very strange, Jeremy, are you sure? And I said I have spent the last several months with this guy; I think he's genuine; he's just very unusual, but this is an incredible opportunity because he could get you guys access to this strategic target.

Mac had a second meeting with Rodney, and he was more convinced. By that time the document was properly authenticated. Other than keeping a secure place for Rodney and Heather, I was no longer involved, but I was basically a

kind of mentor minder, keeping an eye on them. Making sure that nothing funny happened, and that they kept away as much as possible from the exile network, which was difficult, because they wanted to go partying. My operatives in that network also kept an eye.

And then we helped Rodney and Heather prepare their cover story for their return to South Africa. We told them to start hinting that they weren't happy with Zimbabwe and were missing home and were thinking of going back.

Then they departed.

We kept in touch with them. We developed some simple methods of communicating. From time-to-time Heather usually, but occasionally Rodney, would call and make some general references to their health and well-being and visiting their friends in Swaziland and stuff like that which gave me a sense of what was going on.

And then shortly before the Koeberg attack, Heather arrived unexpectedly in Harare, very worried, very upset and basically said Rodney is really going off the rails, he's drinking heavily. Sometimes when he's pissed, he says shit, and I think we should pull him out. And he's not going to manage this.

But I couldn't contact anybody reliable in that short period of time. So, I suggested to Heather that Rodney's not going to come, that we don't phone him, it would destabilise him. What we have to do is try and support him and let him just do his best, and she said, look, he's worried there isn't a proper escape plan, and I said why not tell him to go on a holiday to visit your friends in Swaziland? He'll understand that he shouldn't come to Zimbabwe through airports. He's got to cross the border by road into Swaziland. Rashid could help with that. So, I think she made some calls to Rodney, but you'll have to speak with her and Rodney about that.

It was a difficult issue, an ethical issue. Do you sacrifice a comrade when you are being warned that he's in a bad shape? But I had confidence in Rodney's madness, primarily because he's such an extraordinarily resilient person and I had to make a call without anybody to advise me on it. Heather calmed down a bit as we went through the issues. And Rodney went on, and did it.

I spoke with Desi Angelis. Was she the operative that alerted you about Rodney and Heather?

No. I can give you the name and you can talk to her but I would have to ask her first, but it is a Zimbabwean. Her name is Jackie Cahiri. Desi was among the

South African exiles, but I had no political or operational involvement with her at all.

Rodney might have spoken to Desi but I don't know about that. But it's quite possible she was used by him as a cover to get access to drop the document.

When you got the documents, did you browse through the documents or not?

No. I just had a quick look, it was thick, and looked interesting.

I am very good at that, not knowing anything I don't need to. The Boers tried to kill me so many times, so I am not a curious person, curiosity kills the cat.

Did Rodney have any idea who Mac was before he met him?

I only told Rodney a day or two before, that a senior ANC operative would meet him. I didn't give him a name. I don't know if he knew who Mac was until he met him.

Do you know how many times Mac met with Rodney?

At least two, possibly more, I think. Because Mac went away to reflect – and then asked me to arrange another meeting with Rodney.

Was Heather at any meeting with Mac?

I didn't sit at any meeting. At the first meeting, it was just Rodney. But I think the others may have involved Heather.

Did you have a sort of farewell party at your house the evening before Rodney left for South Africa, soon to be followed by Heather? And people at the party ended up with pins or badges of Lenin and other revolutionaries?

Yes, I think we did. Sounds like what we would have done.

I don't know much about what happened after I handed them over to Mac, and nothing about what happened after Rodney met Rashid. After the event I did meet them, and they told me a bit about their stories. But my role was very limited.

What was your response to the Koeberg operation?

We knew it was going ahead because we were with Heather. And we were listening to the BBC and heard the reports of an explosion at Koeberg.

I think there were one or two other people around. One of them would have been Howard Barrel, the journalist. I think it may have been at his house or possibly at Rob Moore's house that we heard the news. Rob Moore was a South African exile in Zimbabwe who clearly had links with the ANC.

We probably went there because we wanted to use Howard's reporting access to see if any information came through, but he had no knowledge whatsoever of what we were specifically interested in. And there was Howard sitting on the biggest scoop of his life. He was sitting with one member of the unit! When the BBC report came through, I was, like, what the hell's going on, Howard, can you call your journalist friends in the country? But anyway, we were excited, and there were shouts of Viva ANC Viva!

The explosions took place at different times but we were celebrating from news of the first explosion. Howard and Rob had no idea that we had any internal knowledge of the Koeberg operation.

Heather, of course, was absolutely emotional, as you would expect. It was mission accomplished – and bloody well-done Rodney, you did it! People didn't believe in you. I believed in you, and I said later to Heather, you people have really done something extraordinary, congratulations! And now Rodney just had to get out safely.

Heather was worried obviously because the Koeberg operation was a significant strategic armed propaganda blow, and I think along with Sasol, probably the most important one.

I think Heather had to bear a big emotional toll, not just over those few days in Harare waiting to re-connect with Rodney, but over the long period of the operation. When she arrived here, she was emotionally very exhausted clearly.

Heather was very nervous, and she only left for Maputo once we got the confirmation that Rodney was there.

You see, Rodney is a romantic-type, not well suited to the emotional requirements of secret underground work. He paid a high price. People like him were not suited for this, but they were brave enough to do it and the price they paid was their own mental and physical health. I have the greatest admiration for comrades like this because they didn't have the natural attributes that you need to survive this great twilight world of underground and the risks, and so I hold them in the very highest esteem, even though I worry about the price they have paid and what it has done to them and so on. So, I think that that is a particular type of comrade that we should celebrate and respect because they didn't have the attributes you need but they did it anyway.