

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

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Some personal details, first. And a bit about how you became politically aware?

I'm from a politically interested family, so to say, and my parents are from a solid social democratic background. So that came through. At that time, we thought the social democrats were not radical enough so we went further, and one of the things which motivated me was that the students occupied the university – which was very exceptional because it's a technical university – Aachen – where nobody expected such a move.

What issue did you campaign around?

I didn't campaign a lot myself. I was about to finish my studies and very busy. But the younger students were very active. I just had some contact with them.

Later on, I worked for a trade union of education and state employees, which I thought was the most effective way of doing political work. And then I went to Mozambique.

What drew you to Mozambique?

The fact that we knew about the situation of the poor in the Third World, as we called it. There was also the Vietnam War, which we followed very closely. We heard that Mozambique, Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde had a different option of doing development. We had seen the development disasters in Kenya and

Congo and so on. So, we thought this was an interesting model – a socialist one – so we went to help, to collaborate. That's basically it, they needed teachers. There was a solidarity movement with FRELIMO and they were asked to send people there.

So, what did you do there?

I'm a physicist of all things. I think physics is very interesting. But I wasn't a brilliant physicist or anything. And I wasn't interested in sitting in the laboratory and doing physics only. I wanted to look around in the world. In physics research they put you in a laboratory room, there is an instrument there, and then someone closes a door behind you (laughter). That is not my piece of cake.

I'm a physics and mathematics teacher. And I worked in the Department of Technical Education. It's interesting that Mozambique kept those technical schools open because they thought they were important for the country. It was low and medium technical education. In Zimbabwe, they didn't keep them on. I loved to work in those schools in Mozambique because of my technical background.

Do you speak Portuguese?

Yes, fluently.

Which year did you go there?

End of '79. I left end of '89. My partner came too.

How did you come in contact with the ANC?

I don't know, I can't remember, they just appeared in my house (laughter). I mean, somebody must have given them our names, but I don't know who.

Who met you?

Slovo and Rashid. I received a message that someone of the ANC wanted to see me...I don't know who gave my name to them – it could have been Guido, I'm not sure. They just turned up and said, 'Can we come in?' There was Rashid with his friendly smile backed up by Joe Slovo. It was a very short meeting, very simple. They ask if we could do work for the ANC. And they had two options available: the soft option – paper work – and the hard option. And, of course, we were very courageous at that time, so we agreed on the hard

option (laughter). And Joe said when leaving, 'If you get caught, you may end up in prison for a long time'. This is how it went. And then from that day we kept out of the South African community so not to draw attention to us. Also, I had a very busy job.

What was your first political activity for Special Ops? When?

I've been trying to find out when, but I can't remember. I remember a few missions quite in detail, but not sure which was the first one. I think it was bringing a car to Swaziland. That was the usual thing they first ask you. It was about '82. I did it a few times.

What did you do in South Africa?

The first one was bringing two or more limpet mines deep into South Africa. Those were for Koeberg, I did not know that at the time. And the thing is, it was as simple as could be. They came to us, 'Could you go to South Africa in a hurry (laughter)?' They put the limpets in that famous bakkie which they had around; the, I think, Toyota with Swazi number plates. They asked us to drive into South Africa – as far as possible into the country, deliver the stuff and drive back. And you sleep on the way, but not close to the place where you drop the stuff off because you might get seen.

We chose a very long desolate highway where you have one car in five minutes. And we just started to dig and put those mines in and drove back. The problem was that the soil was very hard. We knew that and had bought a pickaxe as a precaution. There was little traffic there and people drove at 120, so nobody noticed us.

I was worried whether the people could find the mines there. I think I used the kilometer poles with the numbers to guide them. The people who came to get it were from Cape Town. We didn't know that, of course, then.

There were four explosions at Koeberg on 18 and 19 December 1982. You left the limpets between Richmond and Middelburg, south of Colesberg. Rodney Wilkinson and Heather Hughes were involved in that operation. They said the map you did was very accurate and the DLB (dead letter box) done was very good. So, when did you get to know the limpets were used for the Koeberg operation?

Afterwards. Rashid said, very briefly, 'Well, thanks a lot', basically. That's all he said. And it was very interesting to work with him (laughter). Yes, he was very

short with words and he was reliable. No extra information. And I didn't ask any questions. Better not to know than to know.

So, when Rashid told you thanks, you took it that the limpets you left there were used for Koeberg.

Ja.

Your next operation?

The Upington bridge. They asked me to go there to have a look at the bridge over the Orange River. I drove to Upington which, I must say, was a very nice route, because it was in spring and the flowers were all blooming and the desert on the way was really exciting.

There was a small bungalow park on the other side of the Orange River. So, I hired a bungalow. And you could hardly sleep at night because of the crickets (laughter).

I bought a fishing rod and got a fishing licence, all very simple and without bureaucracy. And I went to fish a bit here and there, no fish caught. I saw a few fishermen there. It was beautiful there and the highway was very close.

So, I did my job, making pictures, measuring to make dimensions especially, the thickness of the iron beams. Rashid had given me suggestions, but then I did as far as I could. I didn't dare climb up the bridge, it was too risky and it was actually sealed off. There were a few barbed wires there and I thought it's a bit too much. And there were some people around.

But where the bridge ends up on the bank of the river, you could get close to the iron structures and measure the width. And from the photos, you could tell the distance to the object and work the calculations out.

But wouldn't it have looked odd to the fisherpersons and other tourists – your taking photos?

It wasn't hard to do because there were few people around and I would take a photo and put the camera back in a fishing bag. And I also went there one evening as the light was going down, when there wasn't anybody around. I slept two nights there. I was alone.

For a quiet place like Upington, there were quite a few trains. If my memory serves me well, I think I saw a train with armoured personnel carriers.

I could hear the trains at night. I'd been trying to count them. They were certainly used for the army stuff.

Where there security personnel there?

No, not seen.

What happens after that?

Well, I handed over my reports and my films, and they said it was okay and that they were working on it. And then six months later, they asked me to drive the stuff to Upington. We drove through Swaziland, the Swazi-South African border is easier, with less control especially with a Swazi car.

Did you know what material you were transporting?

No. When we had to unload it, it was sealed in plastic and of course you want to get rid of this as soon as possible. But if one wants to blow up a bridge, you can imagine. I went with a friend.

It's a long drive. We slept at roadside hotels. We slept deep into the Karoo, close to Upington. And we went down from the room to the bar with my friend – but she wasn't allowed to get into the bar.

Why?

Well, they had men-only bars at that time (laughter). I mean, they were serious about it (laughter). It was no joke. So, we had to back to our room (laughter). The restaurant was closed.

We drove to the same place where I'd been surveying six months before. No fishing rod this time. And then we didn't even sleep there.

It was a tourist area so my friend put on her bikini and lay down on the sand on a towel (laughter). There were very few people around, and if anybody came in our direction, she would let me know and I would stop digging. There was a lot of stuff, but you could drive the van over the hole, unscrew the hidden compartment and drop the stuff into the hole. So that part was easy.

It was a lot and heavy, I remember. Anyway, you just drop the thing, cover the hole and drive away. That's it.

So, after you returned to Mozambique, did you hear anything about what happened about the operation?

Not so much, but then I think six months later we got a report that they went in and had mounted all the stuff on the bridge and then pushed the button. But the thing didn't go off. They were discovered by the security people and so had to run away. The fuses in the limpet mines – the connection didn't work. That's the story I heard.

But then, of course, it was over because the state knew what was being planned – but that was an interesting operation.

How did you feel about the operation not having been carried out?

Oh, these things happen...In this area of work things can go wrong. But that operation would have been very good, if it would have succeeded.

It was an important operation and justified. The person who thought about this mission had a clever idea. And apparently the security from South Africa were a bit frightened - jeez, they got as far as this.

What other operations or other work did you get involved in for Special Ops?

These two main operations, and a few of those trips to Swaziland. There was one more to South Africa to buy a Ford van. Rashid gave me a bunch of South African rands, which I tried to hide in different pockets. I went by bus. That was interesting (laughter). I drove to Swaziland, dropped the car there and took a bus to South Africa. The interesting thing, of course in Swaziland, the bus was not segregated – though white people would sit in the front, though I sat in the middle somewhere. But when the bus stopped in South Africa, I couldn't get out (laughter) because the first stop was in a black area. I had to stay in the bus and a black passenger would get a drink and food. They were very friendly.

Why didn't you do any further operations?

I must say I had a very busy job so sometimes I had to say, sorry, I have to do something else. But I did do some small things for them. Then, of course, came Nkomati (Accord). And then the story was over.

You could have participated in other ways in the struggle against apartheid – but why did you so readily agree to contribute to the armed struggle?

Of course, we knew what was going on. The anti-apartheid movement in the Netherlands was very strong.

Yes, but why the armed struggle?

Well to us, it seemed to be the most effective for a foreigner. You could protest around, which, of course, had to be done. I think the armed struggle in South Africa didn't have the same relative weight as in Mozambique and Angola – but it did have some impact. We thought it was important. Did we theorise a lot about it? No. Not me. I knew that the ANC did that.

I mean, there's really not much to question (laughter), it didn't even concern our minds. There were all kinds of pamphlets that we could take to Swaziland to distribute later in Soweto and elsewhere – but, I mean, what does it help? It's a bit like what's happening in the Middle East at the moment. At that time, it was like that in Soweto.

We didn't expect the regime to be falling so quickly. At least in the beginning of the '80s, they were very solid in place, we didn't know they were cracking already. One unknown answer for my motivation is maybe that my father had been in the resistance in the Second World War. And he was put in jail and had to do forced labour in Germany. Was he proud of it? No, he wasn't, it had to be done. That was my background for armed struggle – and that may have influenced me...

Were you briefed on what the specific role of Special Ops was?

No.

When did you find out about Special Ops?

Only now, basically. That's very stupid, I mean. Slovo and Rashid never said, 'We are from Special Ops.' I focused on Latin America, and although I've been to Mozambique and South Africa since apartheid, I've lost contact with the ANC. But, yes, it's good to come back to the old ANC issues.

You speak in a, well, nonchalant, matter of fact way about your role in the struggle. Yet you could have been arrested or worse. Weren't you anxious when you were in South Africa?

Ja, it's a good question, but I don't know. Well, you feel a bit anxious – but if things go wrong, they go very wrong – and you're conscious of that. But anxious, afraid? There was one moment which I remember. When we brought back that van from Johannesburg, the starter motor gave us trouble as we got near the Swaziland border. But now you can't take the van back.

And near the border I had to park like on a small hill and in trying to manage, with the starter problem, and in reversing, one wheel got stuck in a ditch, and the van was heavily loaded with iron plates that were to be used for construction of DLBs below vehicles. With a few very strong pulls of people around we managed to get it back – but it was very scary and my face whitened, so that one of the ladies at the customs office asked me, 'Are you sick? Please come and have a coffee (laughter)'. Because I really looked bad. I was worried they would have discovered the plates but nobody paid any attention – and so we went through, no problem.

But if somebody saw the plates, wouldn't they conclude that they're being used for DLBs?

No. Could have been for a development project in Mozambique. I was astonished about how slowly the regime realised that some guys were carrying stuff for the ANC. They didn't look under your van. The trollies with mirrors to look under the car were standing there idle.

When we went to do the limpet mines for Koeberg, I looked underneath the car in Maputo to check – and I saw one of the bolts was loose and the plastic was coming out. I phoned Rashid and said that I'm not driving that car, and indeed within 10 minutes he had somebody coming and securing it.

What do you make of where South Africa as a country and the ANC are today?

That's a very difficult question. Rashid always said – he sometimes became quite philosophical – that when apartheid was gone, there's two options: that South Africa becomes the leading nation in Africa and pulls this continent forward or we going to be in difficulties and will not be able to do that. Everybody has an opinion. I don't know. I haven't been there and haven't read a lot about the actual situation. I only know what comes into the so-called Western press. I don't know what's really happening there, to be very honest. I mean, South Africa is certainly not leading Africa to more prosperous times.

I shouldn't have big judgments. I don't really know about what's happening in South Africa now and what the problems are.

**This is a pseudonym as the interviewee does not want to be acknowledged.*