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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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Comrade Louise, can you tell me a bit about your personal background, how you were drawn to politics? I know you're from the very progressive Colvin family. Did your parents influence you or were there other influences on you and your siblings or both? What drew you to the ANC? And why the armed struggle in particular?

I came into politics through a round-about route. My mother and the history of her family was that they were not political; but they had a liberal outlook and were upstanding Durban citizens, contributing enormously to the community. As Patrick Fitzgerald said to me 'Oh, you're a GONF'. I said what's a GONF? So, he said, 'Oh, everyone knows it stands for 'Good Old Natal Family'. Anyway, that was my South African background, but more formative was my upbringing in different countries overseas. In fact, my first political awareness was when we lived in an area in the UK that was conservative to the core. Anything you wanted to do as a child was organised by the Young Conservatives and I just saw in front of me as a teenager that if you wanted to get people into your fold, that's where you started. Those people would be true blue Tories for the rest of their lives without question.

Which year did you go there and why?

It was Camberley in the stockbroker belt of Surrey. My father was a pilot with British Airways, but he also managed and oversaw the delinking of overseas subsidiaries, so we travelled around the world, which was lovely. But I ended up at a school in England, that was very toffee-nose, in Ascot. Everyone saw themselves as belonging to the Conservative Party. Just to be different, I decided to be a Labour Party supporter. I didn't know much about politics, to tell you the truth, but I learnt by having to defend my position!

Anyway, the whole family came to South Africa, where my mother was born and bred. But we were all born in different parts of the world. And, you know, that's when you can see very starkly the atrocities of apartheid. It just hits you in your face. So, of course, the very first day at university and I immediately

tried to understand the political terrain. And it was quite tough. I stayed in a residence with women who just wouldn't talk about politics.

I became politically active and was elected onto the SRC and was in NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) at the same time as Steve Biko,

Neville Curtis, Paul Pretorius and all those people. The huge impact on me was when they decided to create the Black Consciousness Movement and SASO (South African Students' Organisation). I just felt the wind was knocked out of my sails. I had spent time refusing to get on White buses, not going into any Whites-only places. I used to go to Star Point Five, a discotheque in Umlazi. I used to catch Black buses to the Berea and they would look at me and say, 'no this is a Black bus'. I said, yes, exactly what I want. So suddenly to be told we don't need you was hard. I could understand where Black Consciousness came from and its need. I immersed myself in the writings of that time, but I felt politically homeless.

So then, I just went off in the world hitchhiking and sailing. I love travel. I did anthropology. I love culture. So, I just kept moving but making contact with the ANC in the UK. And, finally, the ANC asked if I could go and set an information and propaganda route in South Africa. And I said, okay. Due to my prior political activity, at Jan Smuts airport they held me for 3 days, eventually allowing me entry only on a visitor's visa.

When we arrived here as a family, I refused to become South African because I wasn't going to support the apartheid regime. So I had no rights here and the only way I could come in was to study, given that I was not allowed to work. So, I went to do some post-graduate studies at the Arts and Culture Department in the University of Natal.

I set up an underground conduit for propaganda material through that department as I felt the university was a good cover. Wellington, who had worked in the Speech and Drama Department for decades and was much trusted, would pull out my mail for me, which was sent to a fictitious name. That got exposed. Wellington said to me 'hey it's out, they found your mail and opened it. They know it's you'. Besides having a high political profile, I had led protests, at the old Alhambra theatre, where the Department put on a play in celebration of Republic Day - even though I was in the play! I'd rush from the protest to the theatre and perform (laughter)! So they knew it was me. I went and asked advice on the very day and Paul Pretorius (NUSAS President) just said 'Go, you don't have any rights here, they're going to throw you out anyway'.

Of course, they raided my mother's house in St Thomas Road in Musgrave (in Durban) where I was living, while I took refuge with my friend Peta Thornycroft. My mother was a lovely, feisty character so she gave them hell. My sister, Tessa, who's not a pot smoker suddenly realised she had some grass

and so she was trying to flush it down the toilet (laughter). It was just one of those funny scenarios.

My siblings are Paul, Tessa and Mark. Paul is the least political. Mark and I were the most politically active. And Tessa married (ANC activist) Govin (Reddy), and their kids are highly politicised.

So then I just got out.

You said the ANC wanted you to set up a propaganda route. What did that mean?

It was ANC material for distribution. I would get large envelopes with a lot of stuff, mostly ANC propaganda material. It would include *Sechaba* and a whole range of things, military statements and so on…

As I said, I worked with Wellington who had been in that department forever. He was what they called the messenger but he was very capable, he kind of ran the office. It was also to send visual stuff to London – such as photographs of the torture and deaths of Joseph Mdluli and Griffiths Mxenge. We got photographs out.

How did you connect with Wellington and trust him as what you were doing was illegal?

That was my own initiative. I was just told try and get a route and I eventually told them alright this is the route, here's the address. They had an address in London to which I could send material. Wellington came across as progressive and I recruited him. I think I went by my instinct.

Did any of the stuff get intercepted?

Until Wellington's warning, no, none of it got intercepted. I did that for part of '79-80. Then I got out of the country and ANC said go and cool down, you're a bit too hot and come back later. I worked with Ian Robertson and Solly Smith in London.

The big issue was that I had a British passport and you can't get a British passport for love of money and so it was really useful for underground work.

I went off to Grenada, an island in the Caribbean, and joined the struggle there. The revolutionary New Jewel Movement under the leadership of Maurice Bishop (Grenada Prime Minister) had taken over power from the US-backed regime. It was fantastic until that got blown up by the US. But that was a wonderful experience. That's another story, but I'm telling you that experience showed me that if we just shared what we've got, the world would be a much better place. They paid the street cleaner almost the same as a minister because that's a bloody awful job to do – but vital. The ministers got a house and a car, yes, but still… And many progressives came to Grenada. There was

so much progress and one could see things happening, the improvements because it is a small island.

Anyway, the Americans put a stop to that. That was '83. It was an internal coup gone very wrong and the Americans then immediately seized on the opportunity. They were coming to save their students at a campus there, they said. Pathetic. But they took over. They took over the airwaves, everything.

Anyway, I then came back to Zimbabwe, made contact with the ANC in '83 with Judson Kuzwayo. He said 'just lie cool, don't get too engaged'. And then it was Farouk (real name: Mohammed Timol) who contacted me first. I had a sort of safe-house where I was staying with Peter Wellman. He had been with the *Rand Daily Mail.* He was a member of the SACP, and worked with the (ANC's) PMC (Political-Military Council) and Joe Jele (ANC NEC member). (ANC leader and Robben Islander) Mac (Maharaj) used to go through Harare. Farouk got me involved and then I met Rashid.

At first, I was going into Swaziland. And I'm no big cog in this thing. I'm little, down at the bottom, but with my British passport I could move around more freely. I think initially they were just testing me out.

So, what exactly did you do for Special Ops?

At first it was carrying stuff, mostly money, I think but also instructions, codes. I don't even know. I didn't ask questions. But I was always passing things on whether it was instructions or maps of DLBs (dead letter boxes) It was very much, working on a need to know basis. I worked in Zimbabwe and Swaziland until the Nkomati Accord and then we shifted.

How would you work with the DLBs?

I was very good at unpacking toilet bags if they had a lining and stuff. It was mainly envelopes so I think most of it was money, but it could've been material too. So, this would be delivered to me and I would put it in all sorts of places. I was quite good at that. I was never suspected in all those years crossing the borders.

How often would you do that? In a month how many times?

In a month, at least once. I had those fat passports that I would completely go through in three years. Then they said 'alright, we know what you can do'. So, I set up a whole legend. I moved to live with Florence Chanakira at the university. She was actually the Women's Residence Warden and a lecturer.

She didn't know anything, she had no idea. But for me it was all about creating a legend that I'm a post-grad student, I'm an academic. I got these letters from Open University saying I was doing research in post-graduate work. So, I had everything I needed. I had a good legend.

I also started teaching at Mount Pleasant School right next door. I took envelopes and sometimes brought back envelopes, working mainly in Swaziland. I later moved into more Ordnance work with Special Ops under Rashid. That wasn't envelopes, it was arms. And I set up safe houses in Botswana after Nkomati, but I continued living in Zimbabwe.

So '84 to '87, I was doing ordnance work for Special Ops. I worked mainly with Rashid and in Botswana I connected with Victor (real name: Joannes Mnisi), T-man (real name: Ernest Pule) and Chris (Lester Dumakude) – all Special Ops operatives who used the safe houses, in addition to comrades coming from South Africa – but of course I would never meet them.

Once Rashid moved to take over Ordnance after the assassination of Cassius Make, Winston Harper, whom I knew as Henry, was my contact. But I also worked a few times with a comrade called Allan. I think that was by default – when something had gone wrong. We had to dig DLBs somewhere near the border in the dead of night. Allan was quite a character. He died.

Rashid would come through to Harare. His wife, Marge Urban, and their son, Ernesto were there. She was the best, the most discreet person you could ever find – ideal for an underground comrade.

I used to meet Rashid quite often. Once I started teaching it wasn't so much. There'd be long weekends and holidays when I would do two or three routes. You hear the stories of comrades who say they were kind of left to it and they never really knew how they fitted in. I didn't know how I fitted in but that was fine because Rashid would go through everything in detail with me. And I really liked that because you could question him. You could say, no, it won't work this way, you should do it that way and he'd engage.

We used to sit there and work everything out and he'd say 'if it went wrong you do this and if this doesn't work, what about this, and what do you think you should do?'. He really empowered his people to be able to take the right decisions and I think to a very large extent that was the success of Special Ops. And so, you know, it was him, mainly him. He didn't throw you to the wolves, but you had to be prepared. Once on a mission, you were on your own. We didn't have computers, emails, faxes or smart phones – only telex and land line telephone from public booths. There was very little means of communication or back-up. The main thing was to alert Special Ops – so they didn't get exposed and could minimise any damage.

What sort of thing would you and Rashid discuss?

Chiba said that he and I just loved to argue (laughter). So, we really gnawed a bone and we really posed questions and so that's something I truly enjoyed.

What training did you get and from who?

I didn't go for MK training because I got trained in Grenada where they put me in Intelligence as part of the Citizens Force. I'm the last person for Intelligence – I am too trusting. Some may say too gullible. But I think it's always my White face, my Queen's English or something (laughter) that made an unlikely spy! So, we got quite a lot of good training – especially tactical training in live simulated operations. This would include weaponry, shooting, advanced driving, team work and protocols, covert techniques and disguise, legends and coded communication.

When I arrived there, they were putting on a big show in celebration of the Revolution and it was a bit badly organised, so I went up to them and I said I'm an exile from South Africa, I'm in the ANC can I come and help you? Next minute I'm managing the whole show.

Did they check your credentials out? You could've been an intelligence officer from the UK?

I think they must've checked me out or if they didn't, they were just trusting. At the last big finale Morris Bishop was there with Bernard Coard (who became Prime Minister after Bishop) and Jacqui Creft (Minister of Education) and they said who's this woman? And everyone's asking who's this White woman that's organising everything (laughter). And they wanted to meet me, so I went up to meet them and they said 'do you want a job?' I said, yes please (laughter). So, I just got into the movement and it was fantastic and very exciting.

I was in the Citizens Force and we used to have weekend and evening sessions. With the support of the Cubans, most citizens volunteered for community activities whether it be defence, or teaching kids, or cleaning and painting public spaces. It was so inspiring. I taught English. Grenada used this old English language, besides their French based-patios (a vernacular that differs significantly from the standard, official English of a country). In the Caribbean, the English would often be French influenced, as during the endless Anglo-French wars, small nations would be parcelled out as prizes to the winner of each battle. Many small islands changed hands between the French and English many times! People would say 'timepiece', not a clock, and 'parishes' for districts, and verbs were never conjugated. They spoke only in the present tense!

When you were crossing the borders in Southern Africa were you not anxious at all about getting caught?

I had training in theatre so I'm good at this stuff – camouflage, acting out a legend, dressed to blend and building a solid cover. Moreover, I always had confidence. And I also lectured in theatre arts and movement, and one of the key things is that your body gives messages; expressions and movement give away a huge amount. There's a whole lot of hidden or silent communication that people can read. So, take job interviews, for example - you would make

sure that you as the interviewer would put the person being interviewed lower than you, and your chair would be higher.

So, I was very tuned into that. It was a bit like going on to stage or giving a speech – if you started with a confident bang, then you're on a roll. And so, I never really allowed myself to say, oh God! In fact, I became quite cocky. I had been asked for some money at the Zambian border once. I absolutely refused and sat there for three days because I refused to pay them something, and I thought maybe this is stupid because maybe I'll really irritate them and then they'll find out who I am. Anyway, I just sat there most of the time. I slept on a bench. I just dossed down in their little immigration table. I was going to be a thorn in their flesh (laughter). I tell you I earned those guys' respect and after that they would let me through with no requests. Thereafter, I used to take magazines for them, but on my terms.

You're saying to me basically you never had any doubts, any fears not at the border, not at any time?

I suppose we see these things through rose-tinted glasses. I can never really ever remember feeling, oh gosh no, I don't want to do this, something bad is going to happen. But I'm the world's greatest optimist, so in my life when I look at things, it isn't about what will be bad, it's always about what's going to work. You know my most fearful moment in a way was dealing with the woman at the ticket counter at London Heathrow Airport.

The Dutch Anti-Apartheid movement had bought a ticket for me in the name of Angela Brown, but of course I was travelling under my real name – Louise Colvin! I was the ANC organiser of the CASA (Culture in Another South Africa) conference in Amsterdam for the ANC's Culture Department, where I was deployed. It was nothing to do with MK or Special Ops. My heart was thumping and my head spinning. England was hostile territory under Maggie Thatcher, who had called the ANC terrorists. How would I explain the name difference? And of course, I had on me my Zambian ANC exile papers. My first and best chance was to bluff my way through. I could not show any sign of worry or fear – so I looked her in the eye, was very pleasant and chatty but not garrulous. I engaged her on which would be the best seat for me. To my huge relief she handed me my ticket and wished me a good flight! You see it does help to have a White face and speak the Queen's English! For me, the absolute acid test is to give no reason for anyone to be suspicious. So, they do not check and double check. If people do not suspect anything, they do not check. The ticket officer did not check the names on the ticket and my passport – the photo was enough! It was me. But to do that well one had to have a really good cover. Following an appropriately dress code is critical! I could be seen as a 'hippy' but never on assignments. That meant hair style, make up. clothing. And one's legend had to be about real places. You had to know what you were talking about. Many agents would be caught because they could not describe

the place from which they supposedly came! I had lived in England – I could pass as genuine British resident not a South African under cover!

But you did very well. It had never occurred to me before how a theatre background could be so useful in managing underground activities.

Yes, it is. Maybe it becomes an instinctive part of you, part your unconscious.

There were activities by comrades like Klaas De Jonge. He was bravely going into South Africa. We needed to prepare. He and I joined a shooting club so that we could keep our eye in – and we had false names. When he got exposed, I just hoped I didn't meet any of those shooting club people (mostly old Rhodies) and of course I never went back there. But there would be things like suddenly you've got to cover up – hide sensitive materiel and cover all tracks. Something's gone wrong. I sometimes didn't even know what. So, there I was once, late at night digging a hole in the middle of the Borrowdale Common (in Harare). It is a big vlei which you think is going to be soft enough soil. It wasn't! Anyway, I tell you some of those DLBs were bloody tough.

I also had to cover for and clear out safe houses. Gordon Webster was in the house that I had rented in Botswana, when he was rescued from arrest. I'll tell you that story because that's a lovely one too.

So just to continue with Klaas. I was told just go and clean up and hide all incriminating evidence. There was too much to hide in a DLB. Instead, I used unsuspecting and unsuspicious people who hadn't a clue. Tessa and Govin were in Italy, their house was rented by this upright British person, whose husband worked for the British Government and there was a little flatlet, in which Tessa and Govin had left all their stuff.

So I would phone this woman and say I'm really sorry but I'm going away and I need to put some of my belongings in there. The one time – and this was arms – I had to move the heaviest box. The woman was there. She was very charming and she said 'let me help you'. Then she said 'Oh, my God, what have you got in here? Guns or something?' (laughter) and I roared with laughter. It's just how you deal with people even when you know they're saying the right thing but you try to deflect it.

You were creating a dead letter box in Borrowdale at night on your own?

Yes. I had to pack up boxes in Klaas' place after he got arrested. I am sure it was both documents and arms – anything incriminating.

How did Rashid communicate with you?

I have a terrible memory (laughter) I'll have to think about that.

I need to speak to Marge, because I think she was often the go-between, except that Rashid never wanted to in any way make her and their child vulnerable. Actually, it was mostly in person. Only short, clear or unexpected and urgent instructions were given via messages or code. When on a mission, we had always worked out whom to contact and what to say – normal conversational English but it would have a double meaning.

Was the specific role of Special Ops raised with you?

Yes. They wanted to ensure that there was a bold political statement made through military activity. Rather than a whole lot of skirmishes that can get covered in the media or not and maybe claimed and not claimed and counter-claimed and what have you. Special Ops was about strategic bold actions that the world even noticed. And they were done with precision, competence and style – so that it gave confidence to the people. People would say, ah, these are our boys, they can actually blow up Sasol or whatever! So, it was about the audacity and the boldness, the detailed planning and very few human victims. And so, I think in a sense there was great pride in making sure that we made those statements.

I'm a pacifist but in all that time I was carrying all those guns, I never got the sense that this is going to be used to kill people. This was going to be used to defend people who were being mowed down. And I believed in a just war anyway. But to carry out those big operations and make a big impact, we had to have the strength to move materiel way beyond what had been our capacity earlier.

What do you think were some of the weaknesses, if any, of Special Ops?

I don't know about their links and their base inside the country so I can't talk about any weaknesses there. I didn't really see weaknesses, maybe difficulties. But I was quite impressed. And I talked later to some other MK comrades and, goodness, they sat around for months not knowing what they were going to do and suddenly they're told to do something without being informed properly.

People joined up with MK but often had no idea what they were going to be doing. So, I think I was in a Rolls Royce compared to what a whole lot of MK people had to cope with. With Special Ops, they took you in and they knew what they wanted you to do and what they wanted from you and you were informed. But I think that was also because we were small in number, but I don't know how many. It was like personal attention given to you.

Of the Special Ops operations such as you know them, which ones do you think stand out and why?

For me, I think, the Church Street bombing was a little bit less of a success because people were killed – by mistake. But I loved the attack on Sasol and

Koeberg. I think those were huge kind of megalomania type of institutions of the apartheid regime and seeing them being attacked was great and inspiring.

How did you hear about Sasol operation?

1980, I was in Grenada when I heard about it. At the time I was so absorbed in Grenada and hadn't considered being in the military. I never saw myself as a military person. I went into Special Ops because I could move relatively unquestioned and I had a really good legend. I had the wherewithal to carry it off. You know there were all kinds of border issues, as I said, and I got cocky. Once there was this poor guy in front of me at the Plumtree border control at the Botswana-Zimbabwe border. It was a burning hot day and he's climbing out of his car and he says 'oh God' and he's shaking.

The official says 'sign this'. And then, like a lot of people fearful of the border officials, he says 'oh I hope I can do it right'. And I thought, shame – he was immediately showing himself weaker. So, he makes this wobbly signature. The official says 'humph that's not good enough, I don't accept that'. I stood there and I said excuse me, you've seen this man write his signature, it's a bit wobbly but tell me that's not him, you must let him through. The official let him through.

I later thought that was stupid – to put the ANC and our covert actions at risk. One is taught never to draw attention to oneself. But on the other hand, if one uses reverse psychology what idiot would – with something to hide – put themselves at risk to help another person? It is also about behaving in a genuine manner – it rings true and sends subliminal messages. It says that you have nothing to hide or fear.

Did you ever have any situation at the border that made you vulnerable?

No, the only time I was vulnerable was in London (laughter), but that was when I was in the ANC's Culture Division, not in Special Ops, which already told you about. I wasn't really at risk. After all, it was in England and I was a British subject. It was not the apartheid regime. It was more a matter of blowing my cover and not being able to continue with my work. That would have cost the ANC.

Did you ever know of a Special Ops operation before it took place?

No. I was not part of the strategising and planning of operations. I only planned for the work I did. The better planned, the greater the detail, the safer I would be. We planned meticulously. As for the rest, the less I knew the better!

And after a Special Ops attack did you get told it was Special Ops who did that?

Well, it was usually commonly known that it was Special Ops.

Which operation in particular can you recall you were told was done by Special Ops?

It would normally be Rashid coming through or Farouk. Other than through normal media and talk among ourselves, I would get the proper information through them. Ronnie (Kasrils) came through once but that was to clear up things. I was too low down to know much.

Who else did you work with?

There was T-man and Chris (real name: Lester Dumakude) who unfortunately died. They operated in Botswana. I dealt a lot with them, and we spent much time together in the safe houses. They were warm, disciplined comrades – small and slim but very agile and alert. T-man always had a broad smile. And I worked with Victor (real name: Johannes Mnisi) who would pop up all over the place – Lusaka, Harare and Gaborone. He was a solid comrade who said little. As operatives, we never asked about each other's backgrounds. It was better to know little about the personal lives of comrades, lest we are ever caught.

In the early years, I connected with Hassen Ebrahim whom we called Georgie, who was working in Gaborone. As I was not known to be ANC, we could socialise and I got to know him and his then wife Barbara. Hassen played an important role. He was like my inductor, making sure I knew about how Botswana worked, what to look out for, what to avoid. And, of course, we discussed politics at length.

They were very key from the time I started going to Botswana, which was in '84, I think. I did mainly ordnance work for Special Ops. But then after Rashid moved to Ordnance from Special Ops around 1987, the Ordnance work I did was for MK as a whole. Thereafter my main connection was Henry (Winston Harper) – a man of few words, quietly spoken and a reliable person.

Did you know about any criticism that Rashid wasn't right to take Special Ops comrades into Ordnance for MK generally?

No, but well, he took me. It made sense. We had the experience and proven capability. The arms we were moving in ever greater numbers were still for Special Ops use and also serving MK and the comrades inside. I cannot see why there should be criticism.

It seems after the Nkomati Accord, Special Ops begins to de-escalate?

It did. Actually, I think it was later than that – perhaps I felt that when Rashid moved to Ordnance. But I also think that there was greater emphasis on supporting the uprisings at home. In a sense it was like passing the baton. The internal struggles were intensifying under increasing oppression and

brutality from the regime. Ungovernability was key. This led to issues around the level of training and discipline of the comrades on the ground in South Africa. It was at that time that the focus changed from exile-driven operations to ensuring strategic leadership inside the country – and Operation Vula came into being.

What else do you want to say about your experiences in Special Opsand MK generally?

You know, in my time in the ANC I never felt any racism. No, you were in the trenches together. You were committed together. I know there are a lot of people who now say, 'oh gosh, we had to give this up and we had to suffer that and we [have] minimal resources and no independent freedom. But I feel it was an absolute privilege of being able to really get to know comrades, really be part of something bigger than yourself and, you know, feel you had a value too. I mean, I just really think I was privileged. And so, yes, there were hardships and we gave up luxuries, and enjoying the arts – going out to the theatre, music and entertainment. We had to be self-sufficient. We were even short of basics, such as sanitary pads, toothpaste, face and body creams – and many other things we take for granted. I made all kinds of oddball things – such as sowing my own pads and filling them with cloth made from old clothes, making face creams with plants and whatever oil I could find, I tried the sticks that Africans use for their teeth etc. You learn to make do with what you find around you. And here was some shit stuff that happened – the raids, the deaths, the never-ending vigilance, the tight and sometimes tight and depressing living quarters, missing family back home, never being in touch with the outside world and friends. A friend, Peta Constable, working for the British Council gave me and Chips (Govind Chiba) a comfortable home in her Lusaka house. That made such a difference to our lives. We owe her big time! On a whole though, it was an amazing experience, and I never ever felt isolated.

When I arrived in Yeoville, we had the first branch meeting, and a lot of new members were asking what are you 'Whities' doing here? And I thought, oh God, I can't bear it. And that was also why I felt particularly comfortable with the ANC outside the country as we didn't have this. The lack of racism or prejudices is something the ANC must protect. I'm really frightened that, that very, very deep commitment to a non-racial, non-sexist South Africa is being eroded by the populists.

That incident when Ronnie suddenly appeared at your door in Zimbabwe, what happened? Why did he come to see you?

He had to come and tell me something and I can't quite remember what it was. There were a couple of times I had to clear up houses after arrests. Sometimes I didn't know why I was asked to clear up. But I have a feeling this case was to do with the arrest of Hélène (Passtoors).

Ronnie says Rashid sent him because he couldn't come and it was linked to Hélène, but, anyway, what do you remember of that evening?

Not too much (laughter). This unknown guy knocks on the door 'Are you Louise?' 'Yes', I say. 'Okay we can't talk here, we'll have to talk elsewhere.'

I was living with Florence Chanakira on the University of Zimbabwe campus, I don't think she was there that night.

It was an incredibly dark night, the moon was not up and it was cold so it had to be winter and he had this jacket with a cap pulled down over his face. He appeared as a dark murky figure – that I could hardly make out… think of Hitchcock movies! And I'm trying to make him out and he says 'we can't talk here …' So, of course, it's the university grounds, it's an easy place to walk. As we walk, and I cannot get a clear picture of him, he's asking me all sorts of questions and I'm kind of responding, feeling uncomfortable – and suddenly I think now how can I be sure who he is? And maybe I'm giving everything away to someone they've sent from bloody South Africa. So, I start deflecting, giving him non-committal answers, what have you. My mind is whirling. Give him enough not to make him suspicious.

How long was it before it suddenly occurred to you that maybe this guy is not who he claims to be?

I think about ten minutes.

He told you he's Ronnie Kasrils?

He didn't say he was Ronnie Kasrils, he said he's Khumalo...

As if he could be a 'Khumalo'? He was 'Frank' elsewhere….

Yes, of course, he could not be Khumalo (laughter) and no, you know you don't ask any further. I ain't going to get the real thing, anyway.

And you'd never seen a photo of Ronnie before?

I must've seen photos, but I just couldn't see well enough to say who he was.

And you never bumped into him in London?

No, in London I was aiming to come back to South Africa. I was very discreet.

So what happens?

So, then Ronnie cottons on (laughter). He says 'oh, you think I'm not from the ANC…'. I said ya, how can I know who you are? And it must have been not too good for him because, well, Ronnie is a well-known and colourful character and has this ego (laughter). I said, well I need a message from someone else or proof of who you are' (laughter). And so, he had to find that. He tells me

things about ANC in exile and comrades names before I then open up.' He gave me enough to believe he was with the ANC, without putting anyone at risk

As I remember Ronnie's account – and he says the two of you have a good laugh when you recall it – it was a dark, stormy night, it was one of those foul nights and this unknown guy turns up at your door with this low cap and furtive manner. And he says you freaked out and wouldn't accept that he was legitimate…

Yes, well it was very funny (laughter). It's one of those good stories that we can live off! Life in exile gave us many stories to tell our grandchildren! But I have none!

And how did you get involved with Webster? Was it because he was part of Special Ops?

Ja, there was a safe house that I had for him in Botswana. One of the difficult things was living the legend of the safe houses. I was not living Gaborone, so it was tricky. Anyway, he got exposed in South Africa, he got caught and escaped from the hospital through McBride and of course they needed urgent cover and safe shelter. I think it was T-man probably who was there and they had to get Webster out. The story made big headlines in South Africa and the region. It worked. But I had to go down fast and deal with this because I was renting these places.

And so now I'm thinking, oh shit, I'll have to find some plausible story to explain to the women from whom I had rented the house. So, I drive down to Botswana going over and over my cover story. Botswana was getting more and more jittery about the ANC and operatives could not move around freely. There were check points all over Gaborone. Finally, I go and see this woman. She's a lovely woman – very quiet and regal. She just said 'hello', 'I know, don't worry, it's fine'. She was Dan Tloome's girlfriend. What an amazing coincidence!

You had no idea?

Absolutely no idea.

Was she South African?

I think she was Batswana.

Anyway, I didn't meet Webster I just arranged the safe-house and cleaned up.

What exactly is this clean up you refer to several times?

Well, a clean-up is to make sure that nothing leads to anybody in the ANC, specifically MK – closing rental agreements, getting rid of all documents,

belongings, incriminating material and whatever and having answers for all queries, so no one would be suspicious.

Chris and T-man, and maybe even Allan, did a lot of the main clean up. But I went down quickly really for what they couldn't finish. After Webster's escape, the Botswana Police were putting up these roadblocks all over and it's like, oh God, I really don't want to be going through all these road blocks with a car stuffed full of incriminating evidence. I was worried about it not being well packed and the smell would alert the dogs that they had at the roadblocks.

Whereas I was fully confident, that any materiel packed by Chiba (Govind Chiba and Ronald (Benno Smith) in Lusaka, was done with attention to detail, using gloves, foil, cling wrap and other materials and finally vacuum packed. It was amazing the way they did it. The vacuum packing assured no smell. And there were layers. They were beautifully done. They used to get military equipment including RPGs and, besides being expertly sealed, they even changed the shape so it did not look like armaments. And they were famous inside the country. Years later we would meet comrades who collected the ordnance and they marvelled at how the materiel would come so professionally packaged. And they were so proud of MK. They would hug us and say, oh it's you guys, you were so professional and safe and did it beautifully. We salute you!

Large amounts were packed and carried in our special cars, converted by Ronald in particular. The cars were chosen particularly for having deep boots, wide doors and other spaces to hide the materiel. My last car was a Rover.

Who paid for these cars? You or the ANC?

The ANC. They were specially chosen for their hidden carrying capacity.

Who was Ronald Benno?

He's a lovely, tall, coloured guy from Ladysmith – Chiba's great mate – as tall as Chiba was short! He could turn his hand to anything. Once home, he went into the army for a short stint but then headed security in the Reserve Bank. He now lives in Mtunzini.

Did you get any stipend from the ANC at all?

Yes, I got the princely sum of R10 per day! But I would eat very little so I could save some money to buy toiletries and in particular sanitary wear, as in those days women comrades were not provided with them.

Loiuse Colivin, in the ANC Arts & Culture Department, 1980s, Lusaka

Were you told that you were not working with Special Ops only but MK as a whole in 1987 onwards with Rashid having moved to Ordnance?

Ja, I was in Lusaka then and I understood that after Cassius Make was killed, Rashid was moved to Lusaka and was going to Ordnance and he'd like me to continue with him.

I had already moved to Lusaka, not because of moving into Ordnance, but because I requested that I go and work in the Arts and Culture Department, where I felt I could play a more meaningful role. All I was doing in those last 2 years, besides the safe houses, was the movement of arms and materiel.

Living underground in Zimbabwe got quite tough. I had to pretend I was who I wasn't. I couldn't pitch up anywhere where I might be seen to be involved or interested in South African politics. I had to avoid South African exiles. One of them was Phyllis Naidoo who criticised me saying 'oh, so there's Louise and she was so politically active, we don't see her at all'. That was surprising because she should have guessed. Howard Barrell – the Pink Panther as we called him - always thought an apartheid spy was around every corner and didn't want to be associated with me. He was the actually the only one that really picked up that I must be involved because I'm so out of the way. I couldn't even tell my friends and Florence, with whom I lived, that I was involved. It was hard to explain my movements. I constantly had to live a lie. It's not in my nature to do that and it takes its toll.

I used to move up and down – so it was a tough existence. I'm even lying to the person I'm living with. I would constantly be on the lookout for people who knew me as they could blow my cover. For example, in Gabs I suddenly saw Paula Ensor (with whom I was at university and on the SRC) with lightning speed I dived behind a wall! (laughter).

I asked to join the Arts and Culture Department, because that was where my heart lay. Barbara Masekela, Mandla Langa, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Patrick FitzGerald, Mmabatho Nhlanhla, Thele Moewa, Bachana Mokoena made up the department. MK said to me I'm still key for crossing borders, but eventually the ANC Head Office agreed. They stipulated I must come above ground as Angela Brown – to ensure my real name was safeguarded for the underground work. Actually, my underground work was much the same, you know, I continued

with Special Ops and Ordnance. But now it was easier and more flexible to go on missions as needed. Previously, I only could only do so when on school holiday. And, to boot, greater amounts of ordnance materiel were being moved. I was even busier than before!

Claire Bless was also in Ordnance. She's an interesting character – born in Egypt and having lived in different countries. Once in South Africa she was in academia in University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg campus, before going into the SANDF, working as a psychologist. She and I were the main gun-runners, I think. We just travelled – Lusaka to Gabs and back – over 1,400 km each way. I was the fastest driver you ever came across. On those long roads, 170 km per hour! The roads were not freeways – 2 lanes – one for each direction. Overtaking was the challenge! In the gently rolling terrain of Zimbabwe I could see cars appear in the distance and work out when we would pass, on the long flat Botswana roads I could see miles ahead. It was Zambia where I'd get held up…lots of old vehicles and trucks which crawled up steep roads from the Zambezi River. I've got this antenna for cars behind and in front of me!

But if you were carrying a load, didn't you make yourself vulnerable by possibly getting a speeding fine or having an accident?

No, never had speeding fines, they never had traffic cops trapping for speeding on those long roads. I did hit some animals and then one night I said to myself, "if I do not get killed by hitting a bigger animal, then I will live to be a hundred!". I mean these things crop up in my brain and they always stay with me and so become my reality – for example I'm not getting married until I'm thirty-five. I am a rational being, but I get drawn to living on the edge…so what the hell.

So, where's your partner Chiba during the time you were working with Special Ops and ordnance?

I lived with him in Zambia when I went there in '86.

When do you come above ground and began to work in the arts sphere for the ANC?

Beginning of '86, I think. But I continued my underground activities. That was the agreement. Before I was working and I'd do it in the holidays and weekends – and now I could adjust my arts and culture work to travel from and to Lusaka.

After 1990 did you continue to serve a role in Ordnance assisting the needs of the SDUs (Self Defence Units)?

No.

I was out of there. Anyway, I was hardly any big wig, and I wanted to move into the arts and culture arena.

Louise Colvin, more recently

So, what do you make of where the country is now? And if you had a sense where we might get to now do you think you would still have played the role you did?

You know, a lot of people turn around to me and say don't you feel betrayed. That's a strong and dreadful word and I'm kind of saying, well, who are they betraying? It's got little to do with me. No one is intentionally betraying any one person in the struggle. The role I played all the way up to that point and our role, all of us combined, to get us to that point was an incredible achievement. I'd do it again. You know it was a remarkable velvet glove revolution. I am proud of what we achieved in a very disciplined and dedicated manner. The fact that we went wrong once taking the reins of power doesn't make what we did, wrong. So, there's no way I feel I'm betrayed…I might get angry with things, but it's not as if anybody intentionally wanted to betray me! And yes, I am angry and upset at how quickly we can slide off the rails and how quickly we can become corrupted by power and money. The factional infighting is not for the good of the people but for power, status and money. That's horrendous. We have let the people down.

But in ways, I saw the writing on the wall when I first came back and maybe we were very romantic. We had our experiences, as I said, in many ways incomparable, where people did behave with integrity. I heard a few stories about some of the characters, guys who were going to make a little plan for themselves and we know those kinds of types. But on the whole, everyone really pulled up their sleeves and was working for liberation – so I would do it again. Yes.

In terms of the armed struggle, I do believe we didn't have much option. We needed to counter the kind of thinking among Whites, that Black people can be suppressed and controlled, as they've got no strength.

We needed to encourage the population. We needed to show that we also could hit back. Because this thing about the apartheid regime being so powerful and all-knowing, it was bullshit actually. Some of their intelligence was dreadful. But we built up this huge image of being all-seeing and powerful. We needed to change or shift that. I was a strong believer in the Political-Military Council and that it needed to be politically driven completely. It was not just a militaristic war. It was just as much a war or minds and words. It was about making statements through MK.

I think that was important, but afterwards, I went to a very interesting conference with the Martin Luther King Foundation and the Gandhi Development Trust. Both those leaders preached and acted non-violently. It really made me question whether in ways South Africa was being brutalised. That we're bloody, you know. We are too quick to fight, to use our fists, take up arms. This is all sections of our society. Much of it is historically cultural. I mean look at the stereotype of Zulus for example – that 'they're aggressive, militarist by nature.' Look at the colonial power and the blood lost over control and bounty of the land. They bequeath us a fighting nation.

But we are a macho society and we pick up a spear, even our ANC symbols and slogans like *Hamba Kahle*, we will pick up your spear. It's about fighting and, in a way, had we gone a slightly different route, had we chosen a non-violent way and managed to get the acclaim that I think Mandela and people gave us internationally, if we had gone a more gentle, a less violent route, would we have impacted on the psyche of people so that violence in our homes against women and children would be less? That we could discuss and I don't think it's only that factor. I think there were many people, whether in the apartheid regime or our struggle, who have got a lot to sort out and we haven't dealt with the trauma of war. We skirt around these issues because it's the stiff upper lip British thing and it's the Zulu 'I don't cry'. I don't think we helped ourselves and I think that's a very crucial thing for us to deal with. A healing process.

You think the TRC hasn't helped substantially enough?

No. I don't want to undermine the TRC, because I think it was recognised as a fantastic means of a whole nation coming to mourn, lay rest certain fears and expose some of the truths. I do believe it's not about retribution, so I do agree. I didn't think it was a blood thirsty retribution to go after those who made the others suffer most. I'm a big supporter of the TRC, but I think we failed thereafter.

It's like so much of what we do, we're really good at setting up structures and developing policies, but our follow through is bad. And so, I think we failed to take it through and I think we left a lot of people who weren't intimately involved of out of the whole healing process. I'm not affected, but 'they' are. And the racism that we see now is in a sense because I can put up this wall and I can just continue as I have always done, because that made it very comfortable for me ….. but I wasn't questioned and I didn't question myself.

So, I think it needed deeper routes and we should've seen this as part of the process thereafter of reaching out. And there are some brilliant people at dealing with issues and racism and transformation and bringing on board people of all colours and classes. There are some really good facilitators. I would've just loved to have seen a bit like what happened in Nicaragua – 'the

each one, teach one' campaign which ignited and spread their literacy. I think we could've had that. And we don't start from racism. We don't say you're a racist. We start from what does it mean to be South African? And I think the media, and in particular the *Mail and Guardian*, had a crucial role, but they failed miserably. Failed to ever give a sense of pride in being a South African. They were too busy in the gutters looking at the dirt, which, yes, we needed to expose, but sometimes we didn't celebrate the good things that we've achieved. We failed in that process to build on the things we could've agreed upon and admired and replicated and given us a sense of pride in South Africa.

In many ways, I think we've gone backwards – we're returning to laagers – the wealthy of all colours, but predominantly Whites, are creating their own spaces – behind walls and secured gates. Some are falling backwards in terms of conservative practices and violence within families and gender abuse. It's the failure to bring greater economic and social equity that lies at the heart of our increasing poverty, inequalities, crime and violence. But these are challenges facing the whole world. We just squandered many of our opportunities for greater shelter, health and safety, better education, higher employment and stronger small business development in a transformative manner. State capture, rampant crime, global syndicates have taken a toll on South Africa.

What's your response to the view that we were in, at least, a semi-insurrectionary situation in the late '80s and that if we had escalated the armed struggle, we would have had a more favourable outcome of the negotiated settlement, maybe it would have been more transformative?

What I think is, I'm not sure we would've got a stronger position from which to negotiate because it wasn't about the armed struggle. I think it actually was the weakest pillar of our struggle. It was about the economy. It was about sanctions. It was about the political insurrection. The apartheid government could not survive a moment longer. That's what brought them to the table. So, I'm not convinced had we escalated military activity we would've had more say.

I think de Klerk surprised us, because he seized the moment and the momentum. Maybe that was a clever move. We weren't quite so ready or prepared for what he did. But we would've had to go to the table and I don't believe that necessarily dragging things out would've brought a different result. Because we were at pains, it seems to me, to get everybody including the IFP and the other apartheid Homelands into the negotiations process and maybe that's our nature. The Cyril Ramaphosa-Roelf Meyer style. Well, that's where some of our compromises come. But, actually, in the rough and tumble of politics – at home and globally compromises are constantly being made.

And I'm not sure if we had been more hardline, that it would've made us more transformative. The only way you're going to transform is if you're more

inclusive. We're reconstructing history from a kind of hindsight here – and how right are you? I still feel I think in my own heart that our failings since a negotiated settlement would've continued whatever. And I cannot see someone stepping out of that and taking us in another economic direction, whether it be in one I agree with or one which I completely disagree with. I worked on the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme), I thought that should be our loadstar – but GEAR knocked it out … what do you do?

You want to open up to the international world you are forced to be competitive. Alternatively, South Africa is rich in resources – but we failed to develop our human resources. I just see people continuing to make wrong decisions. To embark upon a new world order away from this unjust capitalist economy, we're not brave or strong enough to cut ties with that. And so for me the transformative process really has to happen in the economic arena, and it didn't matter what you got out of that negotiating table. Sitting around that table maybe Chris Hani, maybe Jo would've had a stronger say, maybe the communists. But a socialist agenda was always going to be subsumed in an ongoing process that is built on compromises – that were not only national but international. And I think it was a mistake for the SACP to remain in an alliance with the ANC, when it was clear it had very little influence. And yes, leadership would have made a difference. Here, the loss of Chris Hani is most felt.

Is there anything you'd like to say that you haven't already said about your role in Special Ops or the way you see Special Ops or MK or the ANC in general?

Living in different countries and wandering around the world, the ANC became my home. I felt incredibly comfortable, especially as I hadn't been seen as South African. Neither did the British think I was English! I saw myself as an Internationalist, not rooted in any particular soil. But that meant I didn't have a home – beyond family. When I joined the ANC, I had a home. Black, green and gold pumped through my veins and that will never change. The fact it's so different now is a whole other story. I think that armed struggle and the whole mass democratic movement was incredible and I'm really proud of that. The level of organisation, the level of commitment, the getting out in the streets. We can't even do that now, people want a cow or burger before they move two feet (laughter).