

*An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim*

*This interview could not be finalised. It should be read with those of Abraham Lentsoane, Guy Malamba and Peter-Paul Ngwenya to get a fuller sense of Special Ops' attempt to hit a SADF C130 military aircraft.*

**MK Special Operations Unit Project  
Interviews  
Stephen Lux Marumo  
24 July 2018  
Tshwane**

**Comrade Marumo, perhaps we can start with your personal and family details and how you became politically aware and drawn to the ANC and the armed struggle in particular?**

My name is Stephen Lux Marumo. My middle name is hardly used, but in exile they knew me as Lux because when we went to Maputo, in a group of five, we were still calling each other by our first names. So, when we got to Luanda, people already knew me as Lux and so I couldn't change. I remained Lux even in exile, so that was my combat name.

My father, Abraham, was employed by a company that manufactured mattresses. He was never involved in politics. But his elder brother was involved in ANC politics in the fifties. He originates from Lesotho and so does my grandfather. My uncle was arrested and deported back to Lesotho. But my grandparents were still here. And my father was born in South Africa. My father, not that well educated, is number six of a family of six. His brother, the fifth in line, who was a teacher, who came to Johannesburg, accommodated my father.

I was born on 22 June 1959 in Naledi in Soweto. I grew up in a house, not a shack.

My mother worked for an Indian clothing shop in Fordsburg.

I am the second in a family of five. I am followed by my sister and three boys behind. My elder brother passed on in 1979 when I was in exile. The rest are still there.

**So how did you become politically aware, at what age and why?**

In 1976. I was 17. The introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools changed things. I understand that Morris Isaacson, Naledi High and

them were all taught in English, they didn't know Afrikaans. There were five main high schools in Soweto.

I was in Thomas Mofolo, not far from Naledi High. My school was part of the secondary schools that were opened in 1974, if I'm not mistaken. And all of them were using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. I remember the troubles in school started in 1975 before the Soweto uprising. Students fighting with the teachers, not even prepared to attend classes, this was terrible. From primary to secondary we were taught in the vernacular, home language. At least you could read English because you were reading newspapers – but Afrikaans was something more, we didn't even know about it.

Our teachers, all of them, were new from colleges, they were not experienced; most of them were somewhere between ages 22 and 23. They were experimenting, remember it was the introduction of a new school system. The schools were just mushrooming, they were trying to accommodate more of us, and I think it was the year that they scrapped what we used to call standard six. Now that meant you had to move from standard five to standard seven. I think it was during '73-74 when they introduced this system.

I didn't even know what politics was. But there was a student who fought with the teacher because of Afrikaans. We thought he was crazy, ill-disciplined. At Thomas Mofolo before the Soweto Uprising there was a teacher by the name of Sello Mokoena. He must have been from Fort Hare or Durban, one of these universities that you people came from, you know, where the Steve Biko and other type of politicians were. He was that character. So, he was a guy that really could speak to the youngsters, what this Afrikaans is doing to us. But I was still young, my brother told me all the stories Mokoena was telling them - but I was not interested in them. Because I thought, all I have to do is give my parents what I promised them – to be a doctor, that's all, I didn't want to get involved in politics.

But I was forced in 1976. I didn't want to go for the march. These big boys from Naledi High forced us out of school and we joined them on the march from Naledi to Orlando West, that is where the shooting started. I never saw (Hector) Pieterse shot, all I heard was the gun shots. And we all ran. I ended up at home.

There was no schooling after that, and a couple of months later came the police. I was not at home and my brother was not also. But they were not looking for me because I was a youngster. The troublesome guy was my brother, so they were looking for him. But then my parents decided to send both of us to relatives in Sharpeville, just to save us from police harassment. They were trying to hide this silly brother of mine. I was not in politics. I was

worried about academics. The irony is that he remained in the country and I skipped (laughter).

When I was in Sharpeville, I met one of my friends from Soweto, whom I was schooling with. He was also in Sub A running away from the police harassment. So, this guy sort of conscientised me. He told me about politics and gave me some books to read, one was *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. Everybody was reading that literature at that time. There were so many books to read. I then began to open my eyes. He told me about Mandela. It was the first time I heard about this old man. And I was still young at that time. I got tired of staying with relatives and not going to school. I didn't see life without school. I went back to Soweto. But Soweto that time was a different Soweto. Everybody was into politics. I also joined a group because I had no option. I also behaved like I know something, even though I didn't know. There was a guy with the surname Mohapi, we used to call him Fihla. He went out of the country later, but he didn't join Special Ops. I think you must have been told about Chico? He died in one of the battles. Remember, the whole group I left with, our names remained the same. We were with Comrade Lennox, he was supposed to give us MK names, but he didn't.

### **So when did you leave the country?**

In November 1976.

### **What makes you leave? Why didn't you take part in the trade union or civic movement or some NGO or other above ground organisation? They were beginning to emerge. What made you opt to go for the ANC?**

Let me tell you, there was only one strong trade union movement, nothing. If there was anything else, we didn't know. The only strong candidate there was Black Consciousness.

### **Why wouldn't you join the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM)?**

Obviously, we thought it's for intellectuals, those from universities. Besides that, I joined MK because behind where (Ernest) Pule stays, is an old man. He must have told you. This man had a shop. He was working for the ANC. It was the influence of Chico and the rest that made me leave for the ANC. Chico, for that matter, was younger than me, but active. I think he was still in primary school. He was crazy, reckless. Because at that age, I would not have done it. He occupied this leadership position. He was like leading from the front. And we were older than him but we joined him, we thought he was intelligent, clever. I don't know where he got all these books and politics. But I think him

and another guy, who died in Tanzania of malaria, influenced me. So, when we left, we were five of us from the same area.

### **What was the route you took to cross the border?**

The old man arranged it. We were picked up in a car in Soweto by a guy who ended up being a Commander. When we got to about a kilometre from the Swaziland border, we got out and jumped over the fence. That guy picked us up on the other side. We stayed in Swaziland for some time.

### **For how long?**

Quite some time. They kept on telling us that they were arranging with Maputo and whatever. We were anxious. But they were also scared that we shouldn't change our mind, they were really trying hard. When we arrived in Maputo it was December.

That's where our group met with the former Deputy Finance Minister, Jabu Moleketi. We were staying in the same house with Moleketi and two other guys, but then they just disappeared; they didn't join us.

So we were given a choice: go to Tanzania to further your education or to Luanda for training for the armed struggle. We were not forced. And I made my mind up - I want to go to Tanzania to further my education. But looking at my group, all of them were going to Luanda. I thought these guys must think I am a traitor, so I decided to join them to Luanda. But I must say I did not regret – of course, life was a bit difficult, but still. When I left here, I was only in Form 3, seventeen years old.

I arrived in Luanda at a place called Engineering.

### **How long did you stay in Maputo?**

Not long, by December '76 we were already in Engineering. I think it was a new base for FAPLA (People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola). I remember it was a year after their independence.

We stayed there for some time. We ended up being a big group. The June 16 detachment originates from there.

A year before was the invasion by the South African government, but they were pushed back. There was fighting, and FAPLA was too busy to accommodate us. So we were sent to a place called Benguela where we were trained. We stayed for a bit too long there until we got to the South.

## **What were you trained in?**

Basic firearms, small arms, but we were not doing tactics and operations. A few of the guys that came back from East Germany and some from Russia joined us there. Some others also joined us and moved with us to Katanga from Benguela. We moved out from that place because if we had stayed there too long, some of us would have died – there was no protection against mosquitoes. I didn't know malaria was like that. That place was terrible, to be honest.

I think the reason we moved to Katanga could also have been because there was a movement of South African forces towards the South and along the railway. Arrangements were made already with the Cubans, who prepared the base for us in Katanga. They became responsible for our training, for looking after us, everything. We were dependent on the Cubans. That was now '77. I was lucky, I belonged to a company with a good Commander. That company was special, it was a group made up of 18-year-olds. I think there were four companies. Towards the end, a few of us were divided according to specialisations. We went to Luanda in '78 and were sent on to Russia. I specialised in air defence and the others did artillery, engineering and so on. We did six months in the Ukraine.

And then back to Angola in '79. Katanga was bombed when I was in Russia. When we came back, the group that was in Katanga was transferred to Pango, which is not far from Quibaxe. We were sent to Quibaxe, just like the group that came from Russia- who became our instructors and Commanders. We also had to become Commanders and instructors of newer recruits, including Tony Yengeni.

## **So when you came back from the Soviet Union you become a Commander?**

Yes. Most of us became Commanders, some instructors. And then '81, I think, they sent me to Pango to help them establish air-defense protection. We were then sent to again specialise in a place called Kashito, not far from Luanda. I think we were a group of five. It was close to the signing of (the) Nkomati (Accord), 1984, they just wanted to push us into the country before Nkomati. We were then sent to help fight UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola).

When I went to Malanje, I became Commander of a battery, meaning of air-defence systems, protecting the base. I then went to Maputo and get into Swaziland before Nkomati.

But quite a few of us were arrested in Swaziland – because they were waiting for us, they knew, and deported us to Tanzania.

### **How many of you were there?**

Fifty or so. We went to the Mazimbu camp. We stayed there for a couple of months. I was part of the first group to leave Tanzania to Lusaka. When we were infiltrated in the country from Angola it was through Rashid's Special Ops. So, when we were deported, it was the same group. Valdez, Desert, Mkhululi, Pule and all that gang were there. Some of them died inside the country. We stayed in Kaunda Square. Some left before me. So, Peter Radebe (real name: Guy Malamba) and Titi Motsenang (real name: Albert Lentsoane) joined me in Lusaka. We then infiltrated into the country to do our operations. Our instructions were clear.

### **Who recruited you into Special Ops?**

Rashid – where he got my name from, I really don't know. I can't remember the year. Special Ops was a selected few; we were known to be well-disciplined. The way things were done in exile, a bit funny – because when I was in Kashito, coming back from Russia, I was recruited into the Communist Party. It was underground. We were not supposed to be known. You feel you are special because you belong to the Party. The rest are just ordinary members of the Congress. I think my recruitment in the Special Ops could have been influenced by that. If you a member of the Party, meaning Joe Modise knew you, Chris Hani knew you, Joe Slovo knew you. I think Rashid himself was a Communist. I want to believe I was recruited by them because of being special and highly disciplined.

Not politically a star, to be honest, I was young, I was not a Commissar, I was a Commander. So, I was not responsible for political education, though of course I want to believe the Russians had taught me a bit. I understood Marxism-Leninism, I really learnt. If you wanted me to have been something in the Party these days with politics, I would have made it today (laughter).

### **Can you remember when you came into the country?**

It must have been '85/86. But when I went to Maputo, we were already members of Special Ops. And then I went back to Lusaka.

The South Africans, during that time, were still engaged in Angola. Now the intention was to shoot the C130 military plane used for the Namibia war. But Pule would have told you about that.

**Yes, basically that you were meant to bring down a C130 transport plane from Pretoria to Namibia that took South African soldiers there. Pule said that you were given the dates and times and route of the flight and were supposed to hit the plane with a Grad-P. But Pule and them had difficulty in getting the missile in a trailer into the country.**

Three of us went into the country. We did not have any contacts; we had to create our own. Peter knew a guy, whom he was with on Robben Island. I think he was also a Radebe. He worked for BP when he came out of Robben Island. A doctor in Pretoria North, Winterveld. But the guys Peter knew were all from the BCM group, Steve Biko's gang. But we used them as couriers. I didn't know them. I also had my own contacts in BCM. Because these guys were established as early as '72/73. They were there already. They were politically advanced. Most of them were known. One was a law professor who didn't want to be known. Once we engaged them, we realised where these people stand.

...

The materiel we needed for the operation did not come from Botswana. Later we sent Peter Radebe's contact, Peter Ngwenya, to Botswana to get the material we supposed to use. We didn't really know what happened, but coming back apparently Peter was arrested by the police. Pule will know what happened.

**Could this be because the woman from Botswana who Pule and them were using as a courier was working for the apartheid police and gave Peter Ngwenya away?**

I think so. But after his arrest, we kept on. We then went to the doctor. Titi was staying in Ga-Rankuwa. I was staying elsewhere, so I was a bit suspicious. Peter Ngwenya was supposed to be back from Botswana on Monday, Tuesday. He didn't come. I decided, Peter Radebe, just go see what's happening with Titi. Peter went. Titi was arrested. And Peter also got arrested.

The police were told one guy was missing, he's in Winterveld. By the grace of God, I was hardly 200 metres away. I just left the house. I think they must have been at the back of the van so they didn't see me when they were going into the house. Also, they were speeding on those roads that were not tarred, so it was dust all over. I could see the police jumping around. But when they kicked the door open of the house, they didn't find me. I realised, oh no, there's trouble here! I was not quite sure where Peter Radebe and Titi are. I thought maybe I got sold out by the neighbour or somebody.

I didn't know what to do. All I knew there was a guy who used to work for the doctor. We were in Winterveld – that house we got through the doctor. So I decided: let me go to this guy. I stayed in that house about a kilometre away.

The police were kicking down doors looking for me. I stayed there and told him, please just check what's happening.

It was movement the whole damn night and day, police vehicles. They were looking for me. This guy working for the doctor asked the neighbours who told him that two gentlemen – meaning Peter and Titi – were arrested. They were looking for another person.

I didn't know what to do. There were roadblocks for the three following days. I couldn't leave Winterveld, but that guy kept on doing recce (reconnaissance) until things subsided - that's when I left back to Soweto and joined another comrade. I went to him because I didn't have money. Peter Ngwenya was supposed to bring equipment, but also money, because I stayed for a month without any activity. No funds and then they helped me, this new comrade and his elder brother.

Then they kept on saying we are doing a recce (reconnaissance) of Mafikeng to get you to Botswana. I was scared to go to Botswana because I didn't know what happened. Where is Peter Radebe? I was told that Peter and Titi were in a police van. But the Peter (Ngwenya) we sent as a courier to Botswana, I didn't know.

The doctor had helped the police to point to a third person, me. The doctor I think was too soft, he gave them all the information about our movement.

**So, you were identified as the third person by the doctor?**

Yes. The doctor knew the three of us.

...

Instead of going back to Botswana, I chose to go to Lesotho. Remember I told you about my grandfather. I then made contact with my cousin-brother and he took me into Lesotho.

**Did you jump over the fence?**

In Lesotho there is nothing like a border. There's a bridge and you buy food there. There's no asking for a passport. I first went home to where my father's elder brother stayed. But I also wanted to establish contact with people working for the movement in Lesotho. I went to Maseru and stayed in a house with quite a number of people. But then we got arrested. I think the Basothos were also threatened by the apartheid regime. They started sort of collecting everybody that was a South African that they suspected, and when we were arrested and got in the prison cell, I found a comrade who was working closely with Rashid.

He established contact with Lusaka, that's how Rashid and the rest knew I was in Lesotho. All they knew was that there was a mess in South Africa. They thought we were all arrested. They were shocked when they heard I was in Lesotho, and you know what happens, people start treating you suspiciously. How did he manage to escape when his colleagues were arrested?...

Then there were arrangements to send me back into the country again. Now I am on my own. They told me don't come to Lusaka. There was also an operation when Valdez and them were attacked in a house and killed in the East Rand. They were also sold out.

I then came back into the country, tried to establish contact with some MK comrades... Botswana said 'you are the only one now. Establish your group. We will send you material.' I stayed there. But, remember, there were people going to Botswana and coming back. I was complaining, I am sitting here idling, I don't know what to do. 'No, we'll send you materiel And, indeed, they sent me materiel to a DLB (dead letter box).

I was in Soweto, the DLB was in Mamelodi. I went to fetch it with two comrades, Moss and Joe after we got the message. We missed the place because it was not exactly where it was indicated on the map, it was almost 20 metres away. We got the materiel.

Now they sent limpet mines and hand grenades. I was then told to do an operation – a police parade in Johannesburg. Joe says to me the parade is at 9 o'clock. But he said he doesn't trust these limpet mines - someone in Botswana had explained to him that the timing (of the explosion) does not react the same as in Russia, as it may have to do with the weather.

But he then said 'let's test them'. We were in his house; we didn't know how to test them. Okay, we decided to get a pot, put sand in it, put the detonator, pull the safety. It is supposed to be cut and then it will show you for how long. But immediately I pulled the safety – boom it went! Oh, that's where the problem is, meaning someone must have tampered with it.

### **Did anyone get injured?**

No, it's in the sand. These limpets were packed in boxes, with Russian letters. No, these things cannot be tampered with, because I know Russian, so I looked at it, nothing was tampered.

Now we must still test the grenades. So where must you test them? Grenades are noisy. They will sound like – pah! You can't do it there. So, we looked for

an open place. So I went with Moss. When you open the safety pin, the lever, make it straight, and tie it on a stick, and then you pull it, and then it must give 30 seconds before the sound. Before you tie it on the stick, you must open the pin so that when you pull it, there's no resistance. I'm holding the detonator, trying to open it and it's close to my face, because I know nothing will happen, I'm opening the safety pin. Before I could even finish putting it straight, it just went pah, right in my face! That's where I lost this finger completely. I was blind for a couple of days. Because the whole splinter went into my face, so you can see my eyes have been red ever since.

On these limpet mines, I later got from Pule and the rest that there was a guy who doctored the limpets. He was a double agent. And funny enough, when I was on a course in 1996, sitting next to a defence intelligence student, we were both lieutenant colonels, he saw my finger – 'what happened?' Innocently, I told him the truth, the grenade detonated. 'When was it?' A long time ago when I was in exile. He said, 'do you know I used to work with your materiel?' No, I didn't. So meaning this man could have been responsible. Anyway, after the grenade exploded, Moss took me to his house. They didn't know where to take me because it was a serious thing. They were trying to contact Dr Motlana because he was known to help out. But, unfortunately, he was in Sun City watching a boxing match. They didn't know what to do. I was just bleeding. These guys were running around. Then they found a guy, you know these BC (Black Consciousness) types. A doctor working at Lesedi clinic. They took me there but this man says I can't treat him at this hospital because this thing is obvious. I mean they told him the truth.

But he then says we not going to put him in a normal bed. I was then put on the floor so when the doctor comes in the morning, they don't bother you. They are worried about those that have records, not about my case. The doctor came in the afternoon and said it's risky, you can't keep this man here, you must do something. But he then said that my wound had a lot of pus. It was gas, my face was burnt black. Somebody in Baragwanath would just clean it.

### **You must have been in severe pain?**

Severe pain, remember, no stitches, nothing, I am going for the third day. Then came a Portuguese doctor in the ward. Maybe their timing was also wrong, I was on a bed waiting for the other doctor to come. He asked what happened to you. I lied to him, I fell on a gravel road – because it was like flesh hanging all over. He looked at it and said 'but why are you lying to me?' No, I am not lying. He just left me.

When the doctor that was supposed to see me came, I told him that the White doctor passed here. He didn't waste time, told Joe and Moss take your man and go. I went to Diepkloof with Joe, and Moss had to travel to Botswana. He told them your man is terribly injured. Then they arranged for me to go to Botswana.

But I was then sent to Francistown to an Indian doctor of the ANC. He assessed the wounds to see if he can't treat me. He said this man must be sent to Lusaka. In Lusaka, Chris Hani met me. They sent me to Zimbabwe. That's where I got my treatment. This thing was rotten already. So, this finger, there was nothing that they could do, everything was rotten, they had to remove it. That's why I lost my finger. They saved me but I want to believe it could have been better...

...

I didn't know how all this happens. The first time I was not arrested. The second time I could have died. That's why I was told I have got something, *muthi* (laughter).

....

I then came back into South Africa to Soweto and joined Moss, not Joe. But Moss at that time was joined by his wife. So he didn't want the wife to know. So, he made an arrangement, got me a place, where I stayed with a guy, who claimed to have been somehow supporting the movement.

...

**So, did you actually carry out any other operations?**

No, I couldn't. Because of the reasons I gave. But the military aircraft one I think, would have been successful if the guys were not arrested. Well planned and we knew about it, timings, recce had been done, the good thing was everything was done for us. All we had to do was just to execute. Remember you fire it from four kilometres away and we already knew where we were going to fire it at.

...

Titi and the two Peters – Radebe and Ngwenya were sentenced to Robben Island. After 1992 when they were released and came to my place...

**To move to broader issues, what is your understanding of Special Ops specific role? How was it different from MK structures in general?**

There was nothing about a special role that it was supposed to play or missions assigned to it. Special Operations only executed missions by a special crop of individuals in MK. Not just those with bravery but with discipline. For example, Barney Molokoane. And also others. Committed, highly disciplined – unlike with the rest of the other MK operations. Special Ops was a highly select few. Velaphi Msane did not specialise in Grad-P, but he was part of that group. How did they rope him in, I don't know. But I think he must have been a special character. But if somebody had specialised, he could be part of Special Ops. All of us were trained in specialisations – that's why we were in Special Ops. Barney and them specialised in Grad-P. And some in the Sasol group specialised in engineering.

Belonging to Special Ops, it was special because the rest of the people respect you. Let me say, most members of MK wanted to be part of Special Ops. I would say it was special, and even its leadership group was special, led by Rashid, Joe Slovo himself, and also Pule and Tommy (Lester Dumakude). This was a special breed of people. We were very small and we knew each other well. It was the quality of the people. You could not just become a member of Special Ops because you went to the camp and decided yourself. You must have something special. And you had to be chosen.

**Of the Special Ops comrades you knew, who you think stands out?**

Barney Molokoane and Velaphi Msane...