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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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Johannesburg (telephonically)

Let's start with a bit about your family background. Whether your parents or siblings had any influence on you becoming socially and politically aware. And what about your school or other friends? Or your teachers?

My family background, I could say, was typical of middle-class White South Africans. I grew up in East London in the Eastern Cape and matriculated in 1976.

Our family was originally from the former Transkei; they were traders in the rural areas. But then we moved to King Williamstown and then East London. Some of the Spargs are known as quite wealthy. My family was not particularly wealthy. I went to a government, not private, school.

My family was not politically involved at all. There was no conscientisation from any of them. I suppose it really only started at university.

I am one of six children who comes right in the middle. I have three brothers and two sisters. Both my parents were shopkeepers for most of their lives. My mother was also a bookkeeper and legal secretary at times and my father was a traveling salesman for call cash registers, adding machines and such things.

I matriculated in '76 and after this went to Rhodes. I was the first in my family to go to university.

The one incident that does stick in my mind from my schooldays before I went to university was June 16, '76 – not because I was particularly aware of what was going on – but because our Afrikaans teacher walked into our class on that day, and he just stood there looking at us for a few minutes and then asked us if we knew what was going on in Soweto. We all kind of looked at him blankly, and then he just said 'children are being shot in the streets' – and

then he just walked out of the classroom. And then really, he didn't come back to the classroom for the rest of that lesson…He just left (laughter).

He was very interesting. His name was Jack Visser. He didn't really discuss politics with us – he was very interested in literature and he often spoke to me about the Sestigers movement in Afrikaans writing, and discussed the work of Ingrid Jonker and others with me. It was ironic that as our Afrikaans teacher he was the only teacher who actually said anything about June 16 to us.

At Rhodes, I studied journalism and politics. I don't really know what prompted me to do that. I had, in fact, registered to study for a Bachelor of Science at UCT. All my subjects at school were science and maths. But at the last minute, I suddenly decided that I wanted to study Journalism.

It was really then at Rhodes University that the reality of South Africa really began to hit me. It began with the death of Steve Biko. It was obviously a big thing in the Eastern Cape. It was my first year at the university. It was September 12, 1977, the day before my 19th birthday.

The thing that shocked me was not just the brutality of his death, but also the reaction of most students on campus. There was literally a handful of Black students who had been allowed to register at Rhodes campus. Most of them were in the journalism department. People like Zubeida Jaffer (journalist and ANC activist), for example, was there.

I was still living in a university residence at the time and most of them were just glad that Biko was dead. They didn't know who Steve Biko was or what he had stood for. As far as they were concerned, a terrorist was dead, and that was it!

Rhodes was such a right-wing campus then. We also had white Rhodesian students there who used to come back from their holidays bragging about how many 'terrs' ('terrorists') they had shot. I didn't really get involved in much student politics. I was very frustrated with organizations like NUSAS (National Union of South African Students). The heyday of NUSAS at Rhodes had come and gone.

There was a guy called Izak Smuts, who was in charge of NUSAS at the time. It was a very liberal organisation at Rhodes. Guy Berger was quite a big influence on many of us. He was an Honours student at the time. He did some lecturing as well in journalism. And he had set up some sort of self-help organisations and started various newspapers in the townships and so on. So, I got involved in some of the organisations that he started. But I didn't get involved with NUSAS. There were not really any alternatives that I knew of.

I graduated in ’79.

After that?

I moved first to East London where I worked at the *Daily Dispatch* for a really short time as a sub-editor. The big thing that I remember while there was the Silverton bank incident. As a sub-editor I used to work nights, obviously. Donald Woods had left the *Dispatch* by then. (Black Consciousness activist and later ANC and SACP leader) Thenjiwe (Mtintso) had also left. The staff used to talk about her and Woods in tones of reverence.

Anyway, I remember arriving in the newsroom around 6pm on the day of the Silverton Bank siege (three MK cadres ran into a bank to escape from the police and held people hostage and made political demands, but the police killed them in a shootout). And it was clear to me that something was happening because the place was just buzzing. It was the old days when there were no computers and such things. You sat down at this long table and the stories would be handed out to us to edit. I received a story that someone had written about one of the hostages, a woman who actually spoke to one of the comrades before he was killed. She said he had tried to explain to her why they were doing what they were. And she said that he explained that it was because they love their country and they wanted freedom.

It was a very short story, just a few paragraphs long, and obviously all the other headlines about the incident that were being done were all about the terror and the screams of the hostages and so on. The story of this woman hostage did not require much editing. I wrote a headline which said, ‘I love my country’ and I sent it off to the end of the table and sat and waited to see what would happen. I watched as the chief sub-editor scratched out the headline. I walked up to him immediately and looked over his shoulder and I saw he had replaced it with something like ‘Screams of terror’ (laughter).

And I objected and said but those words don’t even appear in the article. Where did you get that from? I said this is not what this article is about at all (laughter). I mean, I’d only been there for a couple of weeks. He kind of looked at me in astonishment and told me to go back and sit at my end of the table (laughter). I saw him write something and then send the article off down to the printer. He came to me later during teatime and told me he’d decided to leave my headline on the article, but said ‘Never do that to me again. I’m the chief subeditor.’

It was one of many encounters I was going to have with editors and chief-subeditors in my short career as a journalist. Anyway, I soon got an offer from

the *Sunday Times* to go to Joburg as a reporter. I'd worked at the *Sunday Times* as an intern during my time at Rhodes University.

It was quite a hectic time in the country. It was 1981 and the school boycotts were building up. I was given quite a lot of free reign. Hans Strydom was the news editor. The guy who went on to write the book about the Broederbond.

Who was the editor at the time?

Tertius Myburgh. I didn't have many dealings with Tertius in the beginning. Hans was a decent political at that time. I also covered labour, really whatever I wanted to, and obviously the student boycotts were a big issue. I did a lot of articles with people like Bishop Tutu, Allan Boesak, and I remember doing articles around the conscientious objectors, forced removals in places like Pageview or Fietas, Mayfair and so on.

But I started getting into conflict situations with Tertius a few times. I had a good arrangement with people like Tutu and Boesak – they used to pass on stories to me, and at some stage Bishop Tutu told me that if I was in a bind, and I needed an urgent comment and couldn't get hold of them, I could make up a comment and just attribute it to him. I appreciated the trust he had in me.

On one occasion Tutu had given me a story about conscientious objectors but it wasn't published. I asked Hans why, and he said Tertius said that the paper's lawyers had said that we would get into trouble if we published it. Tutu phoned me the following week and asked why the story wasn't published. And I told him.

A couple of days later – I had never actually met Tertius before (laughter) - I was summoned to Tertius' office, and he hauled me over the coals, wanting to know why I was discussing internal business with the likes of Bishop Tutu. And I said to him well, you know, Bishop Tutu asked me why the story wasn't published and I had to be honest with him. And he said to me, well he knows the law and he has to protect his newspaper, etc. etc. and I said, well, in case you didn't notice, after you decided not to publish the story, I gave it to the *Rand Daily Mail* and they published it and they haven't been banned yet.

Was he fine that you gave it to another newspaper?

Yes, he didn't seem to object to me giving it to another paper. What he definitely didn't like was that I was questioning his judgement. All he said to me was that, 'well, if you feel that way then maybe you should go and work for Allister Sparks?'

I can't remember the exact dates, but Black journalists had been on strike since 1980. Zwelakhe Sisulu was leading MWASA (Media Workers' Association of South Africa) at the time. A small group of White journalists, about six or seven of us, decided to go on a one-day solidarity strike with them. I was the only one from the *Sunday Times*. There were a few from the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Express*. And these White editors went ballistic. After the strike, they called us all in and threatened to fire us, and said if they fired us then they'd have to fire all the Black journalists as well.

We said to them, look, you guys are actually being ridiculous, this is a one-day solidarity strike. Eventually, people like Allister Sparks and Rex Gibson saw reason but Myburgh was still insisting on firing me. But Sparks and Gibson said no ways, if you fire her, we've got to fire our people and we're not firing them.

The strike was the first by Black journalists and lasted more than a year. It turned out to be the longest strike at the time in South Africa.

This was now approaching Republic Day, May '81. By that stage, I was feeling that there wasn't much future at the *Sunday Times* for me. I'd met a journalist at the *Rand Daily Mail*, called Arnold Geyer. He was a lot older than most of us. He was a South African but had been overseas for some time and had come back. He lived mainly in Germany and was very political.

He'd started these reading and discussion groups. He had access to some ANC and other banned literature. Damian de Lange and I were in one of these reading groups. Damian was working at the *Sunday Express* at the time. Both Damian and I were getting quite frustrated with just being part of a reading group.

And I don't recall exactly how it happened, but at some point we found ourselves talking with Arnold as things were building up towards Republic Day about what we could do as part of the anti-Republic Day campaign. We were generally fed up with White liberal politics; we felt that liberals did a lot of talking, but didn't appear to do much about making change happen.

And we decided that we wanted to take action. The PFP (Progressive Federal Party) was refusing to join the anti-Republic Day campaign, and so we decided together with Arnold, we wanted to petrol bomb the PFP offices. There were three offices that we selected – I think it was Rosebank, Illovo and Norwood. This was in May '81. It went off without a hitch. And we called ourselves South African Liberation Support Cadres or something like that.

It was literally a day or so after that, that Arnold suddenly confronted Damian and I and said that we had to leave the country. We were taken aback because

we hadn't discussed this with him at all before. And he said no, it was absolutely necessary, you're going to be arrested. And he said he was leaving the country first and we should follow and join him.

He then left. We were not clear about exactly how he was leaving, but he told us that Beyers Naude would help us to leave the country. We'd been in touch with Beyers before this – just having political discussions. Arnold then left. Damian and I then contacted Beyers, or Oom Bey as we knew him – all I can say is thank God for Beyers! Because without his intervention, I don't know where we would have ended up. Because it was Beyers who organised for Damian and I to go into exile. He sent us off to Botswana. This was in late May, early June '81.

We were given the impression by Arnold all along that he was basically linked to the ANC, though he didn't say so explicitly. Beyers had given us some contact of a very senior policeman in Botswana, but he'd also spoken to us about Marius and Jeanette Schoon. When Damian and I got to Botswana, we were not sure about contacting this policeman and we decided to find Marius and Jeanette instead – which we did.

You left the country with your ordinary passport?

No. Beyers organised everything. We took our passports with us but didn't cross through the border posts. A comrade called Frikkie Conradie drove us to Mafikeng, and a couple of ANC comrades took us over the border illegally in the middle of the night. It was near the Ramatlabana border post.

And we then just hitched a ride all the way through to Gaborone. We found our way to Marius' and Jeanette's place. We spent a few days with them and then reported to a police station as refugees to get documents. We then stayed at Patrick van Rensburg's house. After a few days I was collected by Pete Richer and Damian was collected by Shaheed Rajie – or Steve, as we knew him then. Pete handled my formal screening and recruitment.

Damian and I were then brought back together again at another house. Damian's girlfriend, Diana Cumberledge, joined him from South Africa. She was pregnant and gave birth to their twin boys in September '81. Shortly after that I left for Lusaka, leaving Damian and Diana behind.

Damian and I didn't plan to go into exile. We found ourselves there. In Lusaka, I was offered the option of studies, but I said I didn't come into exile to study further but to join MK. In Botswana, we hadn't spoken about studies at all. With Pete, I spoke about my response to Biko's death and to the Silverton siege and so on, and I felt that it was time for young White people to be seen

in the ranks of MK. Pete said he understood and that there would be further discussions in Lusaka. In Lusaka, it was agreed that I would go for training. I spoke there with John Nkadimeng and Reggie September.

So you went to Angola? Where did you train?

I had my initial training in Caxito from about January to September '82. I was the only White person there then and most of my contemporaries were the June 16 generation. I met people like the famous operational Commander Barney Molokoane. You know, meeting people like Barney, I suppose, only strengthened my resolve to actually not be just a trained MK member but to actually be deployed in South Africa.

What training did you get?

There were never more than about 60 to 80 people in Caxito. We were only two or three women there. There were times when I was the only woman in the camp.

Most of the comrades had already been trained elsewhere and they came here for preparation for the front. The training I got was standard training - firearms, explosives, tactics, MCW (Military Combat Work). Most of my training was firearms and explosives or what they called engineering. I did well in firearms so I found that I didn't have to spend a lot of time on that.

Most of my days were really spent on blowing up endless pieces of TNT. We obviously couldn't use a lot of limpet mines because of scarce resources. I was trained on my own, except for the political classes which we did in groups. I found out later that I was very fortunate because I got a chance to practice everything a lot. I learned later that in the bigger camps, comrades didn't get the opportunity to practice firearms and engineering the way I did by training on my own in Caxito.

One of my engineering instructors had been to Vietnam and, while I realised I'd probably not use these tactics in South Africa, it was interesting to learn. He had learned all these techniques that the Vietnamese had used against the Americans. He wanted to teach me all the stuff about what to use in the jungle, fighting against helicopters and that sort of stuff. Anyway, it was interesting.

I then returned to Lusaka.

So what was your MK name?

Michelle.

What was it like for you in the camp as one of three women and as the only White? Also, your middle class background couldn't have helped to deal with the rigours of camp life?

Actually, I didn't find it particularly difficult. Some of the bigger camps experienced food shortages and other difficulties, but in Caxito at that time we didn't experience that. We weren't treated to luxuries; it was just tinned food and rice and bread which was baked in the camp. But there was never a shortage of food. We had three meals a day. There was one occasion in Caxito when the Soviets brought in frozen fish from one of their ships in Luanda and we ate fish non-stop for three or four days. It was a very welcome change to tins!

If anything, there were times when I felt I was kind of being mollycoddled and treated as too special, which I actually resented, you kind of just want to be, you know, ordinary, just blend in. In Pango, where I went for refresher training in '84, we got quite a lot of fresh fruit by exchanging tinned food with the locals.

You were offered flowers on Valentine's Day by a comrade , and you were annoyed?

Yes, but it was Women's Day, not Valentines.

One of the medics had been to Luanda and he came back with this bunch of flowers and presented it to me and he called me 'a flower of the nation' (laughter). I discovered only later that this is actually a term that OR had coined for women in MK, but at the time I got the flowers, I objected loudly and said, no, I was not anybody's flower. The comrade was quite disappointed and walked off.

A couple of the comrades and commissars came to me afterwards and explained, and, of course, I had to go off and apologise because I realized that trying to find flowers in Angola was not the easiest thing, and he had gone out of his way. This didn't happen in Caxito though. It was in Pango in '84 when I came back for refresher training before coming back into the country.

About being one of three women, when I arrived in Caxito, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi was already there and without her guidance in those first couple of weeks, I probably would've battled. She immediately warned me, look, you are going to get all these kinds of crazy proposals from everybody. These guys have been in camp for a long time and there aren't women here.

She gave me guidance on how to handle myself in that situation and it was very valuable. I can't deny that there have been cases where women have been harassed and even worse. But I personally didn't experience any of that.

For me, it was training throughout the day and at night it was usually a kind of social gathering. Barney was a great guitar player and singer. I have vivid memories of sitting under thorn trees at night where everyone gathered around when Barney played his guitar and there was singing.

What happens when you get back to Lusaka?

Once I was back in Lusaka I was deployed to the Voice of Women (the publication of the ANC Women's Section) and worked with Mavivi Manzini. I wasn't very happy about it, but it was explained to me that it was a new publication. Besides Mavivi, there was only one other comrade there. And they said that they needed someone with journalistic skills. So I accepted it, and I hadn't been there very long when the Maseru massacre took place in December '82.

That had a huge impact on me. Phyllis Naidoo (ANC veteran and progressive lawyer) came to Lusaka not long after that and she had put together a photo album of the raid. It was horrific. She had taken one of those ordinary photo albums that you put ordinary photographs in, and there were these terrible photographs of mutilated bodies. And I remember just paging through these albums with her, she spoke about all these comrades and babies and children who'd been slaughtered.

And after seeing that, I started talking to Reg September again and said as much as I understand why I am here with Voice of Women, there is no way I am going to accept staying here. And you know I want to be deployed inside the country with MK. And he said, okay, he understands. I cannot remember what his exact position on the Revolutionary Council was, but it took a very long time and it was finally only with Chris' (Hani's) intervention, and also Thabo Mbeki's, that it was decided I should go into the country.

The Women's Section Head, Gertrude Shope, was adamant that I could not leave. Chris Hani explained that they wanted me to join Special Ops. Gertrude still put her foot down and finally, only when Thabo Mbeki intervened, that I then went for a bit more training again in Angola, in Pango camp. And then I was deployed to Lesotho.

What specific training for your Special Ops deployment did you get?

There was nothing very different. Again, it was really a refresher course with firearms and explosives, but with greater concentration obviously on limpet mines, because I was not going to be using TNT inside the country, and there was some MCW training.

I wasn't there for very long. I was there in late '84 because I remember it was over Christmas.

Pango is the camp where the mutiny had taken place in May '84.

When I was still involved with Voice of Women, I had to travel to Luanda regularly, because the ANC's printing press was there. So, I was there every second month.

I was there during the whole build up to that mutiny. I was obviously in touch with comrades, on what was happening in Angola and in the camps. It was a sad time.

After the mutiny, Pango had again changed, and was now the forward camp that Caxito had been in '82.

Before I left Lusaka, I was briefed by Rashid – he was now the Commander of Special Ops reporting to Joe Slovo, and I was briefed by Joe as well. One of the things that I remember Joe said to me – and I didn't take it seriously until I came back into the country – was that I was going to find it difficult 'being White again' when I got back into the country. He said 'you've got used to being here with comrades and you've probably forgotten that you're White', and I said ja, you're right. Then he said, 'once you're back in South Africa, you're going to be reminded every minute of the day that you're White. Whether you like it or not, you're going to be white again, and you're going to be on your own.' And when I came back, I realised just how right he was, and it was really traumatic, you know, being treated with the privileges of being White again.

What did Rashid and Slovo say the specific role of Special Ops was as distinct from other MK units? And what did they expect you to do?

I don't recall an in-depth discussion on Special Ops itself. Joe did give me a brief background on why Special Ops had been set up.

My first discussion was actually with Chris. He gave me a brief background on Special Ops and spoke about the fact that I was being deployed into the country as a White member of MK who could do certain things that a Black person couldn't easily do, because I wouldn't be identified as a threat. And he

said that it was decided that I should go into Special Ops. He said that the fact that I was trained in the smaller Caxito and Pango camps meant I had not been exposed to a lot of people. He said I was one of the first White people being deployed in the country as an MK member and I shouldn't forget this. People in MK would be watching me.

When Joe spoke to me, he mentioned Barney. Obviously, I didn't know when I met Barney that he was in Special Ops. In fact, when I trained in Caxito, I didn't even know that a unit like Special Ops even existed. Joe told me about the kind of operations that Barney had been involved in, the targets chosen. Obviously, since I was going to be operating on my own, he wasn't expecting me to go for those kinds of spectacular targets. So, we discussed targets like police stations and how I could gain access to these.

He also spoke about smaller targets like magistrates courts, smaller SADF offices and that type of thing. The focus was on the security apparatus.

I was particularly asked to consider doing what Hein Groskopf later got to do. I was asked to reconnoitre the Wits Command in Jo'burg as a potential target.

With Rashid, we didn't really discuss targets at all. He spoke about more practical things like who I would be working with in Lesotho and told me that it would be Eddie Mabizela – who I knew from Angola. He'd been the camp Commissar in Caxito. He was now a Commissar of Special Ops and was the head of Special Ops in Lesotho.

Eddie died in 2004.

You go to Lesotho and then?

I met up with Eddie. It was a bit of a rocky start. Rashid had given me some phone numbers for people who'd put me in touch with Eddie. But nobody answered the phone. So I hung around there for a couple of days, not knowing what the hell to do.

Were you staying at a hotel?

Yes, in Maseru. And eventually I had to get on a plane back to Lusaka. I said I cannot stay in this bloody hotel forever. I managed to talk my way through the airport in Lusaka into town.

I had a false South African passport, and I discovered later that there was this big buzz in Maseru about Mrs Woods. The false name on my passport was

Mary or Elizabeth Woods and everyone said that Donald Wood's wife was back in Lesotho …

Anyway, when I got back into Lusaka the only place I could think of going to that I knew there would be few comrades was Billy Modise's place. Once I got to Billy's place, I made contact with Rashid via Janet (Love). He insisted, no his phone numbers were working, and I said well, no, they are not, that is why I'm back here.

After a couple of days, he gave me some more phone numbers and said 'they're working now, you can go back', and I said, well, let's hope so. However, before I left, Chris came to see me and said okay, he heard about my troubles, and said 'don't tell Rashid that I've been to see you, here are some contacts in case you get into trouble again.'

When I got back to Maseru this time, I didn't even have to use the phone numbers luckily, because on my first night I booked into a hotel and then made my way to another one to phone, and when I walked into that hotel, there was Eddie in the reception area.

Was he just coincidentally there?

It was completely coincidental.

In '85 I moved in and out of South Africa. I could not base myself inside the country for any length of time; we didn't have a lot of resources. So you would travel backwards and forwards. I travelled through the borders using this false passport and I never encountered any difficulties at all. I didn't have a vehicle and I hitchhiked around the country.

Interestingly, on a number of occasions the police actually gave me rides (laughter). The police were very worried about my safety. One guy actually wanted to pay for a train ticket for me (laughter). I said to him no, I don't have time to sit on the train, I would rather hitch a ride. I found it surprisingly easy in those days to get rides.

I used various border posts around Lesotho and it was surprisingly easy to travel between Lesotho and Johannesburg.

The first time I was asked to go into the country, Eddie had asked me to go to what was then called Pietersburg, now Polokwane, to contact comrade Peter Mokaba, who he said they'd lost contact with, and he needed me to find out what happened to him. I also needed to get in touch with Khangale Makhado,

who was a senior AZAPO (Azanian People's Organisation, a Black Consciousness organisation) leader. I was given his contact numbers.

Eddie also said that there was an Air Force base outside Pietersburg that I should speak to Khangale about trying to get some information about. I said to Eddie, a White woman trying to reconnoitre a base like that in a rural area would draw attention, especially as I had no vehicle. He said Khangale woud help.

When I got to Pietersburg I phoned the number I'd been given for Peter and some friendly woman said, no, Peter's in Joburg, so I said okay, where in Joburg and she kept quiet for a while and said John Vorster Square. I just put the phone down.

Khangale was working in an advice office and I went there and introduced myself as a journalist. He was very polite and said, 'well, we have never met each other before', and I explained that Eddie had sent me and he just looked at me for a while. Anyway, we spoke about Peter briefly.

So when I raised this with Khangale he said, yes, he knew Peter and he's been in detention for about four or five months.

I told Khangale about this air force base outside Pietersburg and he just laughed and he said 'why would the ANC send a White woman to come and talk to me – an AZAPO guy – about an air force base (laughter)? I mean obviously he said he could not help me as well (laughter). So we just basically said goodbye and I left.

This poor guy, after I was arrested, he was arrested as well. They kept him in detention for nearly nine months. He was released in December '86.

Is that because you had connected with him?

Well, he said they were determined to line up as many witnesses against me as they could. But it turned out that wasn't necessary. He told me later he had made it clear he was not going to give evidence against me and was prepared to serve two years for refusing to appear as a state witness.

How would they have known that you met him? Were they monitoring him?

I'm not sure, and haven't worked it out. He was detained just before the Easter weekend, towards the end of March. I mean he's very generous about it, he still laughs about it now.

Even when you get to my arrest it's still a mystery to me, how they knew that or how to find me.

I got back to Lesotho and told Eddie what I knew about Peter and what Khangale's response was.

The second Maseru raids took place in December '85. I was in Maseru at that time. Eddie was very careful obviously to make sure that I didn't come into contact with a lot of people. There were probably about four or five comrades that I had come into contact with. I had stayed briefly with Leon Meyer and Jackie Quinn who were both killed in the '85 Maseru raid.

Eddie had even cut off my contact with them. Basically the only person that I had any contact with, at the time the raid took place, was him. I remember the morning of that raid I was staying on my own in what I suppose you would call a compound. Most of the people staying there were lecturers, civil servants and other professionals. I had a small transistor radio that I used to listen to the BBC News, and the news came over of this raid and they didn't mention everybody, only Jackie and Leon.

They didn't say how many people had been killed at all, and this was the six o'clock news. A few minutes after the news was read, I noticed that Eddie was approaching the house and he seemed to take a long time. He was very hesitant but he finally reached the front door and when I opened it to let him in, I asked him, why are you so hesitant, and he said, 'I didn't want to see any more bodies'.

And I kind of looked at him and then I said what? And he sits, and I say is it true the news, that Jackie and Leon had been killed? And he said, 'yes, they are not the only ones' and then obviously went on to tell me all the news.

And he then said the only reason why you and I are not dead is because of the curfew. I said what do you mean? And he explained that there was a curfew from, I think, 10pm, they had been talking in Maseru for a while about South Africans coming to raid. Eddie didn't drive, he had a driver and he said he'd decided the previous evening to collect me to come to this party or braai where all the comrades had been killed. But on the way to my place, the vehicle had run out of petrol and because of the curfew he decided not to take any chances so he just went home. He walked home with the driver and he said had we gone to the party he and I would have also been among those killed.

As we discovered later, the raid was set up by an agent by the name of Elvis Mackaskill who had invited all these comrades to his house and left before Eugene De Kock and his killers arrived.

For once, the ANC's inefficiencies benefited you (laughter)?...

Yes, I suppose so (laughter). Eddie said I had to leave Lesotho now and I said to him what do you mean? He said, 'get your things now, you are leaving now, I am taking you to a bus, and you have to go back into South Africa now, this place is not safe'. So he walked ahead of me. He got onto the bus with me and he sat a few rows in front of me.

After a few stops, a group of MK guys got onto the bus. A couple of them had been in Caxito with me and I could see they were excited with big smiles, and then I could see Eddie just looked at them very sternly and they immediately sat down and ignored me. One of them was Lizo Ngqungwana who went on to become the Western Cape MK Commander. He was arrested in April '86 and eventually received a life sentence in '87.

I only came back to Lesotho once more in February '86. I received a message from Eddie then that the Cambridge police station in East London had to be bombed. I questioned it at first, I said I don't want to operate in the Eastern Cape and particularly not East London as it's my hometown, I am too well known there.

He said this police station is notorious, headquarters of security police in the area, and it must be hit now. So I said okay, as long as it's a once-off thing, I am never going back to the Eastern Cape again. I was put in touch with comrade Stephen Marais who would assist in helping me to transport limpet mines to Joburg. Stephen was working in a small village near Herschel on the border of Lesotho at the time.

We needed a vehicle to transport the mines and Eddie had said Stephen was going to assist me because if you rented a car you needed a credit card and Stephen had one. But when Stephen tried to rent a car in Joburg his credit card was declined. So what do we do now? This rental agency wouldn't accept a cash deposit.

I contacted my younger sister, Debbie, and she said would help. She was not involved with the ANC, but she knew that I was in the country. I told her I needed the car to fetch somebody from Lesotho to bring to Joburg. I said I've got this credit card from someone, but it's not working.

So Stephen and I first travelled to Maseru where we collected the limpet mines. Comrades packed them in the vehicle and then we travelled to East London. We stopped first at his village and then on to East London. I dropped Stephen off at the beachfront in East London. He didn't know anything about the Cambridge police station operation. I didn't think it was necessary for him to know.

I couldn't do any reconnaissance of the Cambridge police station. So, the only thing I could think of when I walked into the police station was to say that I've come to apply for a gun license. They gave me the forms to fill in. I then asked if they could please show me where the ladies rooms are, and they said they are out of order but someone will show you where you can go. They took me on this long trip all the way through the police station, through to the back where there were also a lot of offices.

It helped because they took me right through the radio control room to the toilet that was next to the control room. Later in my trial they claimed that this was some sort of public toilet, which was absolute rubbish. I armed the limpet and placed it in the cistern and left.

Luckily, the way the police station was set up, I didn't have to go back through the charge office again because the radio control room was off a courtyard at the back, and the gates were open and not guarded. So, I just walked out of the back gate and made my way to my car which I'd parked some distance away and went to collect Stephen. I had about an hour before the limpet would go off.

I told Stephen that we needed to get out of East London as soon as possible, but we couldn't travel in the direction of Transkei. I just said we were probably going to encounter roadblocks. On our way in, we had also encountered roadblocks, but we didn't have any problems. I said we needed to travel in the opposite direction towards Grahamstown and we spent an evening in Port Alfred. It was only when we got to Grahamstown that the news came over the radio about the blast at Cambridge. Stephen was a bit puzzled about why I hadn't told him, but he accepted my explanation

The next day we travelled back to Herschel, I dropped him off and came back to Joburg. I'd hired a flat.

What was the damage to the Cambridge police station?

It was quite extensive because it was next to the radio control room, which was badly damaged and so were the police vehicles parked nearby. There was

no injuries, unlike the limpet at John Vorster Square where a few people suffered slight injuries.

Because of its history obviously, we wanted to hit John Vorster Square particularly. This was the security police headquarters and known as 'Torture Headquarters'. People had died in detention here. I did some reconnaissance. When I went the first time in March '86, they stopped me at the gate to ask what my business was, and I said I want to apply for a gun license, and they explained to me where I needed to go. I was not searched when I went through the first time.

When I went back to carry out the operation, I had the limpets in my handbag, and I was stopped by a Black policeman. There was a White policeman in the guardhouse reading a newspaper. The Black policeman wanted to search me. I couldn't allow this. So, I started protesting loudly. His White colleague looked up to see what was going on and objected, and told the Black policeman he could not search a White woman. And he told him to let me go.

So, if it wasn't for that White policeman, they would have discovered the limpets. I made my way to the first or second floor of the building where there were some toilets that I could place the limpets in, and, luckily, when I walked in they were empty. So, I was able to place two limpet mines and leave the building without anybody taking any notice of me. I only realised these were men's toilets when I left the room. But as I said, the place was empty.

I then made my way to the Hillbrow police station. I hadn't tried to do any reconnaissance of it because it was just such a busy place and I didn't want to take the chance of being recognised when I came back the second time. So I walked into the charge office, which was not that busy, but busier than John Vorster Square. I asked somebody where the toilets were, placed the limpets and left.

My flat wasn't very far from the police station and I didn't make my way straight back to my flat obviously. But a short while later the news came over the radio of the blasts. I didn't pick up immediately that the Hillbrow limpets hadn't exploded. This was, I think, 4 March. To this day, I don't know why I didn't pick up that the limpets at Hillbrow police station hadn't exploded until my arrest on 7 March. Those days, there were all those coffee shops and book shops in Hillbrow, and I'd been walking around and buying newspapers when I actually picked up that I was being followed. I don't know why – maybe I was overconfident – I just didn't think that they'd arrest me then. I just thought they'd follow me around for a while and maybe monitor me to see who I contacted. So, I thought I still had time to kind of work out what to do.

So I made my way back to my flat and had been there probably about 10 minutes when there was this knock at the door. It was one of those doors that has a window. Instead of opening the door, I pulled the curtain aside to see who was there. There was this White woman looking at me and she was surprised because I hadn't opened the door and she looked to her right, obviously at someone standing next to her.

When she did that, I realized, okay, it's the police, and I started backing away from the door because I realised they were going to come through. I mean the next thing I remember was that I had four or five policemen on top of me with guns pointing at my head.

I had had this argument with Eddie before in Maseru about wanting a gun. He'd refused to give me one. He said 'what do you want a pistol for?' I said, well, why should I be unarmed. He said if I give you a gun you are going to die – because I know that if they try to arrest you, you're going to use it and they are going to kill you. He said there is no way that you are going to be able to take on a whole bunch of policemen. It doesn't matter how good a shot you are, and he point blank refused to give me. I mean, he was right, I would've used the gun and I would've died. I mean, it's really to him that I have owe my life today, I suppose.

In that situation with all those guys on top of me with their guns I just lost my temper, completely lost it, and my fury really was because I felt so helpless, and, I mean, we were just screaming at one another, and it was stupid because at that moment, you know, when everyone's tempers are flying anything could have happened.

But eventually this guy walked in, I think it was a Lieutenant Pretorius, and told us all to calm down, and we were at the flat for a long time. While we were busy screaming at one another, one of the policemen said to me, 'Ja, you are Marion Sparg, you are responsible for the John Vorster and Cambridge police station blasts'. Yes, I said, and Hillbrow.

There was this deadly silence in the room. They looked at each other and then a couple of them rushed out of the room – and then only did I realise that the Hillbrow one had actually not gone off, and then they went off to obviously look for it and detonate it.

It's a question I ask myself up till today and lots of people have asked me – 'how did they know it was you and how did they find you?' And there are some senior comrades who approached me after my release and after '94, and said do you think this comrade or that comrade informed the police? Some of these comrades have said they know it's this or that comrade. The comrades that

they named are dead, and I never actually approached any of them and so to be fair to them, I don't feel there's any point going down that route. It's still a mystery to me how the police traced me. I did make mistakes like making contact with my family but they still had to know where to look for me.

Marion Sparg, after her detention, 1986, Sunday Times

So what happens after your arrest?

I'd already discussed with Eddie what would happen if I was arrested. I'd explained to him that I was going to plead guilty and was going to explain why I joined the ANC and MK and so on. He wasn't in complete agreement, but you know he was a Commissar, so after lots of discussions he said he understood my reasoning. But he was not entirely convinced.

It was in the middle of the night when I was eventually taken to a magistrate where I was asked to make a statement. It was this elderly White guy, he just sat there at first with a look of shock on his face to see a White woman talking about bombing police stations.

I was then taken to John Vorster Square and the question that I am often asked is how did you feel about now being taken to the very police station that you'd bombed (laughter).

And, yes, when a journalist asked me this after I was released from prison I said there was a point at which I was afraid, but, honestly, you know, at that time, you don't even have time to think about whether you're afraid or not, there's just too much other stuff you have to think about.

There was one rather funny moment, it was probably the first or second time when I was being taken up to the 10th floor for interrogation, and I was always handcuffed and shackled with leg irons, and these things made a hell of a noise when you walked, and we were walking down one of the corridors on our way to the 10th floor, and suddenly some bright spark popped his head out of a door and shouted: 'Chips guys, bombs on the first floor!' I was amused but the guys escorting me were not too pleased.

I was in John Vorster Square for six months. No detention is obviously pleasant, but I wasn't physically tortured. The guy in charge of my detention was this very nasty character, Major Alfred Oosthuizen, who was later the handler of Olivia Forsyth. He was a very strange character, obsessed with White people in the ANC.

I was working on my own inside the country without any internal network. All the people I knew in Lesotho at the time I was arrested, with the exception of Eddie, were dead. I did tell the security police about Steve. He was picked up on Monday, the same day the police went public with my arrest. They first said a White woman had been arrested in connection with the bombings, but then later named me. I spoke to Steve later about why he hadn't picked up on my arrest, but he explained that he hadn't been at home and was at a workshop when he was arrested.

My parents and my sister were arrested before Steve and from a small town like East London you can't keep something like that quiet. So this is also what made it difficult for them to keep quiet about my arrest. Oosthuizen had told me on the Sunday already that my parents and Debbie were arrested. He was using this to put pressure on me.

When you saw your parents while underground, did you tell them that you were in the ANC or MK? If so, what was their reaction? And while in exile, did you have any contact with family members?

They knew already I was with the ANC, so they didn't ask any questions about that. I had spoken to them on the phone once I was in Botswana and explained that I was with the ANC and wouldn't be returning. I didn't talk about MK at all. They were mostly concerned about my wellbeing and safety and were just pleased to see me, and have some contact. I didn't see my family at all in exile. I did receive one letter from my parents, which I received when I was training in Caxito in Angola. There was also a small parcel with a few toiletries and things. Quite amazing that it all reached me there in the bush in the middle of Angola. If I remember correctly, the letter and parcel had been left with Damian in Botswana who then passed it on. The comrades who brought it told me to write a letter back and they would try and post it. I did so and I learned many years later that my parents actually received it.

They arrested Debbie because she helped with the credit card?

Yes. She was kept in detention for about ten days at John Vorster Square.

Why would they pick your parents up?

I had seen my parents once after coming back into the country, but the police were convinced that they were helping me. When they searched my parents' home, my younger brother, who was working for a security company at the time (laughter), told me later that among the documents they found at home was a list of factories that he was responsible for providing guarding services for. They were convinced that this was a list of targets (laughter).

He said it took him a long time but he eventually convinced them that this was simply a list of the companies he was guarding.

The security police at first believed that my whole family was involved but after they realised they were wrong, they just wanted to use threats of arresting and detaining them as a means of pressurising me.

As I said, my detention was not pleasant, but it was nothing compared to what other comrades have gone through. I cannot even begin to complain, if I can put it like that.

The police wanted me to point out all the border posts I would use to cross backwards and forwards, so we went on this incredibly long trip to all these border posts around Lesotho.

Absolutely ridiculous, because I'm not sure what kind of evidence this was? Pointing out border posts? But at least it meant I got out of John Vorster Square and, I mean, it was crazy because wherever we went, we stopped at police stations, now this was all over the Free State and the Eastern Cape, you can imagine these small police stations. And at every police station we stopped, instead of putting me into a cell, I would be taken into the police station and introduced to the commanding officer and then they would serve us tea and coffee and biscuits (laughter). I mean, this was crazy. I was a terrorist, but I was White, you see. I would be sitting there in shackles and leg-irons and handcuffs in his office and these White ladies, their secretaries, will come in and serve us tea and coffee and biscuits (laughter)!

It was complete madness. In Queenstown I remember the commanding officer there – while he was serving us tea and coffee – asking me different questions. At one point he asked me whether I was aware that people could have been killed at John Vorster Square and I said yes, of course, I was aware of that, but policemen are armed, they're not civilians. I remember he looked at the police who were my escorts and said 'Yissus! She's sitting here so politely and calmly drinking my tea and coffee and then tells me that she's happy to kill us!'

But yes, it was crazy (laughter). On another occasion, these police decided they wanted to go to a steakhouse for lunch. But they didn't know what to do with me! So they said, no, I must come into the steakhouse with them, and it was busy, it was lunch time. So there we sat at a table with me handcuffed to this policewoman the whole time, in leg irons and shackles. I could see the other diners in the steakhouse just looking at us, like we were a spectacle (laughter).

In Queenstown the commanding officer refused to let us stay the night there. We got there quite late but the commanding officer said it was not safe and the security police were really angry, but he said, no he was not having any terrorist in his police station, we must go to East London. He had served us tea but we had to travel at night all the way to East London. We were supposed to go to the Tele Bridge border post, which I'd used on several occasions.

The Queenstown commanding officer, however, told the security police that the Sterkspruit area was an ANC hotspot. There had been several shootouts there. We'd driven all that way, but the security police said, okay, no we are not going to Tele Bridge. So the whole trip to the Eastern Cape ended up being a complete waste of time.

Anyway my trial eventually took place in November '86.

You've got the letter the police found when they arrested me. I'd written a letter to my mom, but hadn't posted it yet.

The prosecutor in the case, Kevin Atwell – who I obviously encountered after 1994 when I joined the NPA (National Prosecution Authority) – he'd been briefed by the security police that I was pleading guilty, so they thought I was going to try and say sorry and so he was hoping to use this letter to try and prove just what a committed terrorist I was.

It backfired completely because, if anything, the letter actually worked in my favour. They'd compiled a list of like a hundred witnesses. They also flew my whole family up to give evidence against me. Obviously none of them ended up giving evidence because it was unnecessary. So the only people who gave evidence were from John Vorster Square and Cambridge police stations and a couple of security policemen, and Brigadier Herman Stadler, their so-called ANC expert.

Apart from the issue of the judge not being able to understand why a White person would join the ANC, I had a huge debate with the prosecutor about soft targets. The prosecutor tried to argue that by bombing a police station I

was actually going after a soft target. The judge actually intervened a couple of times and pointed out that he was misquoting me and was mistaken.

But I also had a debate with the judge, and it was useful because he asked me what was the difference between the cross border Maseru raids and me bombing a police station and other such questions, and the Kabwe conference had just taken place, so it was an opportunity for me to talk about the ANC's policy on soft targets.

The landmine operations were taking place at the time, so I was able to talk about that as well. The big thing when it came to sentencing was the judge's complete inability to understand why a White person would join the ANC; in fact, he said that I was White was an aggravating factor as far as he was concerned. The length of the sentence was not a surprise to me, they'd asked for life and that's what I expected, I really did.

But isn't 25 years quite severe for the limited activities you engaged in, not that they were not important, but nobody had died and the few injuries at John Vorster were slight. Wasn't the tough sentence because you are a White woman?

I think that the judge was determined to make an example of me. You'll remember that he said that I was White was an aggravating factor. When I heard that the prosecution asked for life, I expected the judge to agree.

Did you feel good about the operations you'd carried out or did you feel unfulfilled, as it were, that you didn't do enough before you got arrested?

I'd accepted I'd probably be arrested because the casualty rate in MK was high. I didn't expect to survive for a long time underground inside the country. But obviously I didn't want to get arrested, and I wanted to survive as long as I could. In terms of handling the explosives, I had no serious concerns. I was properly trained and fortunate in that I was able to have so much practice during my training.

You asked me if I was satisfied with what I achieved. I suppose yes and no. You're asking the question now and it's not something that I'd seriously thought about before. I think my answer would be, I wish I could have done more but also accept what happened.

I'm not sure given the limited resources that we had, there was much more we could do. I know we talk about Special Ops having all these wonderful resources. Actually for all that time, I think I survived on about R2000. I never

had the use of a vehicle. I don't think I could have lasted much longer than I did. I even had to go to my sister for a credit card. This shouldn't have been necessary if Special Ops had all the resources that people say they had or thought they had. There were units in Special Ops that were better resourced. But things were what they were, and we did what we had to do.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter the number of operations you carried out and how long you survived. What was of greater significance about your case was that it drew public attention to White women being in MK. In a way, the symbolic and political significance of your trial, it seems to me, went far beyond the actual operations you carried out. Your response to that view?

I would agree with that. But it's a combination of the trial and the type of operations I think. I think it was the John Vorster Square bombing that made an impact on the regime.

As I explained, I understood the objectives of Special Ops was armed propaganda. Not just armed propaganda because obviously operations like Sasol and Koeberg did real economic damage as well. The real significance of the operations however was the propaganda value.

I agree with you about the significance of the trial. That is why handling my trial in the way I did made sense to me. I didn't feel that there was any other way to handle my trial other than the way I did.

Did comrades appear at your trial as a show of support?

They were there, but in limited numbers. I got a sense that people were fearful but the police also simply packed the gallery. I mean, my lawyers actually complained about this on the last day, but there were comrades there and certainly on the last day of my trial, it was quite a good turn out from comrades who had come to greet me with flowers and ANC colours and all those sorts of things.

But it was completely different to the atmosphere when Damian's trial took place in '89. You just couldn't compare the two situations. Just the difference that three years made was remarkable. By '89, Comrade Walter (Sisulu) and them had just been released as well. And by that time you could see the fear was gone. Then people came out in full force.

Marion Sparg pointing to her Hillbrow flat, 1986, Sunday Times

Which prison did you end up in?

Pretoria Central.

Which other political prisoners were there?

Barbara Hogan, Trish Hanekom, Jansie Lourens, Hélène Passtoors, Ruth Gerhardt and Sue Westcott. Phumla Williams and Priscilla Mkhonza were allowed to join us in 1990 from Kroonstad. By the time I was released in '91, it was just Sue, Phumla, Priscilla and myself. Barbara had been released in '90.

You were described in the media as the first White woman to join the MK. There were, of course, other White women in the ANC underground. Some were also in MK? Hélène, for example. Or Laurencia Richer? Or Jenny Schreiner who carried out MK operations?...

What I've read is news reports saying I was the first White woman to be convicted as an MK operative. There certainly were White women in MK before me, like Lauren who I met in Botswana. It was the nature of my trial and the fact that it was John Vorster Square that was bombed that drew attention to me. Hélène was sentenced just before me but the media tended to focus on her being a Dutch or Belgian citizen? Sue Westcott was in MK. Her trial followed in '89 with Damian and Ian (Robertson). When I got to the camps, comrades spoke about a white woman who had trained before me. I found out later this was Sue Rabkin. I got to know Sue later.

There was also Muff Anderson. She had worked on the *Sunday Times* at the same as I did in '81. I never knew her and we didn't meet in exile, but she was based in Botswana at some point. There was also Stephanie Kemp. She was not involved with MK at the time but had been involved with the ARM (African Resistance Movement) way back in the '60's already But after serving her time in prison, she went into exile, joined the SACP and ANC and was part of building underground structures in the country with comrades like Sue and David Rabkin, Raymond Suttner and others. There were other white women involved in ARM too. And then of course there's Janet Love in MK and *Operation Vula.*

When do you get released from prison?

On 27 April 1991. Susan (Westcott) was released a few days before me. Phumla was released in March. Damian, Ian and I were released on 27 April 1991.

Going back to Arnold (Geyer) – where did he go after leaving the country? Did you ever meet him again?

Damian and I spoke to Arnold once in Botswana. We told him we were with the ANC and he didn't seem too pleased. He thought we should be joining him in Europe. I didn't have any contact with him after that. I heard a long time ago that he was in Zimbabwe at some point but really have no idea what happened to him. He remains a mystery to me.

To what extent would you say your operations fell within Special Ops specifically rather than MK more generally?

Any of the targets that Special Ops went for could have been targets that other MK units could, and did go for. One of the things that set Special Ops apart, was not just the targets, but how they operated.

As I said, I didn't have an opportunity to have an in-depth discussion with people like Joe about this. People like Gebuza (Siphiwe Nyanda) and others will tell you how difficult things were in Swaziland and other frontline areas. So I can understand why someone like Joe would propose something like Special Ops to OR.

It was like saying, okay, we are facing challenges in our general MK units. Can we set up something special outside of that, which would have a particular focus on high impact operations. But also operate in a different way, outside of the general MK structures.

It was, of course, aimed at armed propaganda but also, as I understood it, to just bypass all of those particular challenges that the general MK structures had. It takes time to set up MK structures in forward areas and inside the country and there was a need instead for a smaller, more mobile, flexible kind of unit that could just move and act quickly.

Do you know why Special Ops begins to peter out after 1984? Secondly, what is your response to the view that from the mid-1980s Special Ops began to move away from high profile economic and military targets and carried out more routine MK activities?

The casualty rate in MK was high. I haven't given any special thought to why Special Ops began to move away from high profile targets. There were a few high-profile targets in the late '80s like those of Robert (McBride) in '86 and Hein Grosskopf which included the car bomb at the Witwatersrand SADF Command Centre in Joburg in July '87. Hein's operation and other MK work have always been played down by the regime, and deliberately so. Here was a White Afrikaans man from the heart of conservative Afrikaans society who had joined MK. They really didn't want South Africans to know about him.

But to get back to your question, I haven't studied the issue and am not sure I can answer it beyond referring to the obvious issues around resources, challenges in forward areas after Nkomati and cross-border raids in Lesotho and Botswana, the Angola situation – not just the mutiny, but having to move the camps to Tanzania and Uganda, all of this would have impacted on the ability to plan and carry out high impact operations like Sasol, Voortrekkerhoogte and Koeberg.

Rocky Williams (MK Military Intelligence operative) wrote an article in which he argues that because Special Ops got the direct attention of Tambo and Slovo and was allocated more resources and was not directly accountable to Joe Modise – this led to some resentments from other MK units. There's view too that Special Ops took most of the cream of the crop, as it were, from the camps? Do you know anything about these claims?

Look, in terms of taking the best people I think this is a bit silly because let us think of a few top names, say Chris Hani or Siphiwe Nyanda or the late Western Cape Commander, Lizo (Ngqungwana) who I knew as Sipho in Caxito, they were not in Special Ops. What about the Lion of Chiawelo (Petrus Jabane). He was an outstanding comrade and was spoken about all the time in the camps. He received the National Order of Mendi for Bravery in 2009.

There was a comrade called Zakes (Zukile Matakane), I met him in Caxito. He was an amazing comrade, he died in a shootout in Mdantsane. There were a whole lot of them from the Alice area in the Eastern Cape, amazing comrades. They've built a monument to all the MK guys who died in combat from that area. None of them was in Special Ops. Then there was General Dambuza (David Malada). He's a legend in Limpopo and fought in so many rural battles. He's written a book called *So then the guns started roaring*. Most people talk about Barney and yes, he does stand out as one of the most amazing examples, but there are so many other comrades whose names are not known and whose stories need to be told, and they were not from Special Ops. In their own hometowns, they are spoken about and have become legends in their communities. So, it's not true to say that Special Ops had the best cadres.

Look at *Operation Vula* for heaven's sake, who was chosen for it? Some of the best cadres. So it's not true that Special Ops got all the best people. In terms of resources, it makes sense that if you are going to take on the kind of operations that Special Ops did, they would need better resources.

I mean, if you are doing a Voortrekkerhoogte or a Sasol, you need bigger resources. And if you are also going to operate in the way Special Ops did, where you're not living in the country and basing yourself there permanently, where you have got a mobile unit that is moving in and out of the country quickly, you need the resources to be able to do that.

But my experience is that even in Special Ops there weren't many resources.

I, personally, haven't come across any comrade who has expressed those views. If anything, comrades have spoken highly of Special Ops and most of them talk admiringly about Barney and the kind of operations that they were involved in. Also, somebody like comrade Speech – David Moisi – who was involved in the Sasol operation, doesn't specifically say he was in Special Ops, as opposed to MK. They don't make that kind of separation. They just talk about Barney and MK.

Which two or three operations of Special Ops do you think stand out and why?

I think Sasol, not just because of the armed propaganda value and that it achieved international media coverage, but because of the actual damage it did. Also Koeberg, I suppose, just because I don't think anybody ever dreamt that a nuclear power station could be hit. And then I suppose it would be Voortrekkerhoogte, because of the symbolic value of hitting such a major military installation.

What do you make of the Church Street bombing?

I didn't discuss that with people like Joe then. But if you look at the book *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* written by Alan Wieder, he points out a couple of things. He says first that the operation was labelled 'Operation Ruth First' and Joe objected to this and that the timing was premature. The remote for the bomb went off early, and that's what led to more civilian deaths and the two comrades themselves being killed in the blast.

I was in Lusaka when this operation took place. I remember comrades talking about it. There was quite heated disagreement with some comrades feeling that the attack was justified because the target was a military one with others

saying no, too many civilian casualties and so on. It was only later of course we learned about the problems with the early detonation. It was, with hindsight, always going to be a risky operation with the possibility of many civilian casualties.

A big issue in the ANC, as you know, was finding the right relationship between the mass and armed struggles, since probably the launch of MK. To what extent do you think the ANC found a reasonable balance? Secondly, how would you characterize the period from the mid-80s to 1990? Do you think we were in a semi-insurrectionary situation? And if the ANC had carried on the armed struggle, do you think that would have altered the balance of power in our favour and created the conditions for a more transformative dispensation after 1994? Or do you think the ANC was right to do what it did in the way the transition was effected?

I was in prison from '86 to '91, so I didn't have direct experience of what was happening on the ground. I don't think we were in a semi-insurrectionary stage, I think there probably were signs of that in localised situations, if I can describe it like that. I think, you know, one of the areas that came close to that was probably the East Rand or Vaal situation, where there was a version of People's Power, if you want to call it that. But at a national level, no, I don't think so.

You know we always used to joke about it, that we would one day be riding into Pretoria on tanks. But, honestly, I don't know how many of us really believed that would happen.

As for whether we got the balance between the political and military struggles right, I don't feel qualified to respond. But I don't think we always had time on our side, and hindsight is a wonderful thing, but in the situation we were in at the time, I don't think there was even a choice about whether we should slow down, so to speak, the armed struggle. If anything, leadership in exile was accused of not wanting to send comrades home to fight. This was one of the things the mutineers used to stir up trouble in '84.

The ANC was in exile and there were so many comrades in the camps wanting to fight, I can understand why the armed struggle got the prominence it did. And it also makes sense to me why the political struggle or the mass struggle got the prominence it did from the internal leadership. It's about where people were located.

What I can say though, is that in all we were taught in the camps, it was always emphasised that politics comes first. That politics does not come through the barrel of a gun.

Are you aware of the ANC's Green Book and what its significance was for the political and armed struggles?

I know about the Green Book but I don't remember it being discussed in camp during my time there. But the notion of being based amongst the people and so on was certainly discussed. The key document that was discussed was the ANC's *Strategy & Tactics*. There were many difficulties establishing solid underground political bases in the country, and as I've said, in practice, you didn't have the luxury of time and space to do that and 'slow down' the armed struggle. Can we really have those neat separations between the two forms of struggle, phase them in mechanically? So, if there was an interpretation, based on the Green Book, that military struggle should wait, or be preceded by mass struggle or political struggle, this was not practical in my view. How does armed struggle always 'grow out' of mass struggle?

The ANC leadership was faced with thousands of the post-76 youth followed by the Young Lions in the '80s, who demanded training and arms and wanted to come back into the country. Inside the country you also had a situation developing where people were expecting this generation to come back. So how could the leadership send these militant youth wanting to take up arms in the country and say no, don't take up arms, your job is only to build a political base and wait until conditions are ripe before you do?

The Green Book did emphasise points that were already part of *Strategy & Tactics*, that politics is primary and power will not come from the barrel of a gun, and it did highlight how important it was to pay more attention to mass mobilisation and so on.

But, as I've said, as sound as the Vietnamese advice in the Green Book might have been in terms of strategy, it was hard to implement in the conditions the ANC found itself in.

When you think through some of the experiences that comrades like Dambuza (David Malada) had which he covers in his book, *So then the guns started roaring.* He took part in so many operations, like the Tshipise battle in '83, the Kruger National Park, Kangwane, Ingwavuma and Sibasa – all in '81 – and Masingiri in '86. They were nearly bust on some operations because local shopkeepers and others gave them away, alerted enemy forces to their presence. Despite this, they managed to get away and retreat safely to Swaziland. So, certainly the value of being based in the community is one I

can't argue against, but as I say, in the heat of the moment, confronted with the demands for action against the regime, I don't know how realistic the Green Book strategy was, how it would work out in practice.

As you said, you didn't discuss in-depth with Joe, Chris and Rashid the specific role of Special Ops when you were recruited into it, but it seems since your release from prison you've got to know far more. Do you want to say anything at all about what you think the overall strengths and weaknesses in the Special Ops were?

I think the strengths were, as I said, that it was more mobile and flexible than other MK units, and it was able to be selective about its targets. All MK units were trained as guerrilla fighters so you can't pick out Special Ops as a special forces kind of unit as you would in a conventional army. My understanding, as I've said, is they were designed to operate outside the general MK command, deliberately so, to undertake high-impact operations like Sasol and so on, but also to be able to move quickly, anywhere in the country and thus bypass some of the challenges other MK units faced. I don't know if I can identify particular weaknesses, and I suppose its weaknesses would be the general weaknesses of MK. I've already mentioned that even Special Ops had to spend periods of time in the country, and so certainly in Barney's case, he and his comrades ran into trouble with some local people. I suppose another weakness would be the same challenges that other MK units faced – and that was not enough resources. If you're going to be Special Ops and really be mobile and flexible and not rely on internal networks, you need to have resources, to be self-reliant. This was not my experience, and from what I know of other comrades' experience, which is limited, it was also a challenge they faced.

Marion Sparg, recently, Beeld/News24

Briefly, what happens to you after you're released from prison?

I was first with the ANC, in what was called the Border Region in East London, where I worked as the publicity officer, but then moved to Shell House to run Cyril Ramaphosa's office. He was the Secretary General at the time. I had been elected to the NEC at the ANC National Conference in July 1991. When the Constitutional Assembly was set up in '94, I worked with Hassen Ebrahim, the Executive Director. Louisa Zondo and I were the two Deputy Executive Directors.

I then had a very brief time in local government in the Vaal, and then back to parliament again, with (later ANC Chairperson and a Minister) Terror (Lekota) and (ANC activist and progressive lawyer) Bulelani (Ngcuka) in the National Council of Provinces. I then moved to the NPA (National Prosecutions Authority) in 2000. Bulelani had been appointed as National Director of Public Prosecutions in 1998. I was CEO of the NPA and Scorpions for seven years.

I left there in 2007 and moved into the private sector to do communications with Pat Govender. We worked on behaviour change campaigns, with clients Soul City and others. We also did a lot of work with Eskom on electricity theft. We did very good work with them until Mr (Brian) Molefe took over and shut us down. We also did work with (Hawks Head) Anwar Dramat. It was an advertising agency, but we were running sting operations and closing down syndicates. We were saving Eskom billions of Rands. Our campaign covered the entire country from Limpopo to North West to the border of Mozambique. We didn't only target communities. We hit big business and farmers too who were stealing electricity. Even in Soweto we were winning the war against illegal electricity. We told Eskom that we couldn't use their brand so we didn't go in with their name.

The councillors were wary at first, but we recruited people from the community and trained them as community workers. Eskom sent in their technicians to install the prepaid meters, but our guys did all the community work and talking, and we got the community police forums on our side. Our community workers were so popular, many of them won council seats in the local government elections in 2006. I mean, it was really working and then Mr. Molefe shut it all down.

But anyway, after that, as you know, in 2017 they asked me to come in and help with the CR17 campaign. And then since 2018 I have been in the Presidency at Luthuli House.

Where do you think the movement and the country are now?

You know, whenever I'm asked this question I remind comrades of what Comrade Joel (Netshitenzhe) said when he addressed the MK National Conference we convened back in December 2016, when he reminded us that the beneficiaries of state capture and corruption won't give up without a fight. He told us then we were at a crossroads as the ANC and the country. He also told us we were forgetting about the slogan: 'The struggle continues'. The last five years since then have certainly shown just how right he is. I have not given up on the ANC or the country. I do think we are turning the corner, or going back to what Joel said, that we have chosen the right path. Unity and

renewal are not just slogans for me. They are part of the struggle. There's no going back. We have to fight on.

If you knew when you were there in MK how the country would pan out now, would you still have done what you did?

Yes, absolutely! Not that one could have imagined that things could have gone as badly as they have in the past decade or so, but I don't regret having done what I did. I don't think any of us could have imagined things could have gone this wrong but at the same time we mustn't throw the baby out with the bath water, as they say. We can't forget all that has been achieved and this doesn't in any way justify or seek to excuse or make light of what has gone wrong. We are in serious trouble and the Covid-19 pandemic has created a whole other set of challenges for us to deal with, but I remain convinced that we have the will and the leadership to see us through.