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MK Special Operations Project

Interviews

Riaz Saloojee

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Johannesburg (telephonically)

Can you give us a brief insight into how you became politically aware?

Well you're aware of the fact that I come from a political family. My father was very active in the movement and was the President of the TIC (Transvaal Indian Congress), and he had a great influence on my formative years. I grew up in a very liberal, left-leaning environment.

With his community activities, I was exposed to many progressive issues from a very early age, and obviously followed carefully the events that took place in 1976. That really conscientised my understanding of where we were and what we needed to do in order to liberate our country. Of course, I was still in junior high school but the first wave was '76. The big wave that came after that was in 1980 and I was at St Barnabas College, an Anglican school, which was privately funded.

The chairperson of the governing board was Bishop Tutu. It was one of the first non-racial schools in South Africa. It was a very small school. But many of the students who were there had also eventually found themselves in political environments in later lives and one or two of us also found ourselves in uMhkonto we Sizwe.

I became involved in the student boycotts of 1980 and was a member of the Student Representative Council and, of course, parallel to that there was increasing political activity in the country as a whole. And I grew up in a family that was very much involved in the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Apart from being in the SRC in 1980, before you left the country, were there other structures or campaigns in which you were involved?

No. I had some exposure to ANC literature and there were people who were trying to influence us also to join it, but this was done in a very informal way. Because of my access to a lot of literature, I was I was very familiar with the activities of the ANC and of the armed struggle.

What made you specifically choose to take up the armed struggle instead of continuing mass activity? What made you specifically go for the armed struggle?

By this point I was already quite familiar with things that were happening internationally, specifically reading stuff on the Cuban Revolution and other struggles around the world, and about people like Ché Guevara. It was very romantic at that level. But at some point I also began to understand the dynamics of what was going on in the liberation struggle.

My own view was that the kind of brutality that was being meted out at that point by the Security Forces against students and the public meant that we had to fight back. I became very conscious of the fact that if we really wanted to liberate our country, we had to reinforce the different elements that were at play in liberating our country.

Of course, we had the mass democratic movement internally, the ANC political underground and uMhkonto we Sizwe. There were very few of us at that point who were not African who joined MK. My own view, thinking and consciousness led me to believe that the best way to express myself was to join the armed struggle. Also to demonstrate that we are prepared to give our lives for this country.

Can you recall a particular moment where suddenly you decided the mass struggle is not for me, I want to join the armed struggle? If so, what was that moment? Did somebody approach you to join MK?

I think there were a few of us who were talking a lot about the different forms of struggle and where we could contribute the most. I think one of the key issues was that at the height of those mass struggles, MK was active, but it wasn't a significant factor at that point.

In our discussions on how best we should express ourselves, a few of us felt that the level of brutality being meted out by the apartheid regime required a response that would also give our people a sense of confidence that we can confront the state in a different way, in a significant way, to show that there are those of us who are willing to take up arms against it. Of course, the history of MK is also steeped in a huge revolutionary tradition, and there were increasing MK actions taking place.

There were instances which motivated our people, conscientised our people, and acted as a catalyst for some of us to say that the armed struggle could be one way that we could contribute in a more significant way to the struggle.

How do you get out of the country? Who facilitates it? Do you tell anybody in your family?

Some of us attempted to leave the country once or twice, but were unsuccessful. It was 1980, and I was in my matric year and it was critical that I finish my matric at least.

Fortunately, through my father's contacts, I still had the ability to leave the country. I went to Canada to finish my A levels.

Did you leave legally, with a passport?

Yes.

Did he (your father) know at that stage that your aim was not necessarily to come back or if you came back, you would as an MK combatant?

No, absolutely not. That was my decision. I finished my A levels and spent a few months at a university in Canada studying political economy, but I was already planning my exit back to Africa through the ANC's structures. Eventually, towards the middle of 1981, I was back in Africa. I spent some time in Lusaka in transit on my way to Angola to do my military training.

What happens in Lusaka?

I was met by Eddie Funde, the head of the ANC Youth League. He was my main contact together with Max Sisulu, who was also in the Youth League. They facilitated my movement to Angola for training. I did my basic training there for a year.

Which camps were you in and what training did you get?

I did my basic training in a camp called Malanje. It was quite strange, when I got to the training camp, I was one of two non-Africans in that camp and the camp consisted of about a thousand people. The first non-African I met was Comrade Damian De Lange. I'm sure you know him, from the Broederstroom unit. I finished all my general basic training and some specialist training in

engineering. I then worked at the Regional Head Office in Luanda for several months.

Were you only in the Malanje training camp? Did you go to any of the others?

I was called back to Lusaka and became part of the political underground structures. I worked with Comrade Mac Maharaj. I was also sent back to Angola for specialist training in a camp called Kashito. I was trained to train other people. So essentially I worked on the armed propaganda units for a long while. Then I was recruited into in the Ordnance Department of MK and worked with Comrade Cassius Make, who was the head of MK Ordinance.

When did you move to Botswana and what was your role there?

In 1983. I was still part of the political underground, but also training MK propaganda units in armed propaganda. It was training cadres who were based inside the country on how to conduct operations against enemy targets inside the country.

So who did you train?

There were many different units. People were sent to me and it was on a-need-to-know basis. I trained many people and I didn't know if they moved back into the country under their different commands. I was only responsible for their training. At some point in 1984 I joined MK Ordnance fulltime. I was responsible for the movement of ordinance, that is, military hardware and equipment, smuggling weapons, into the country for MK units to utilise in their operations.

At what stage do you get involved in the Safari truck operation (a truck that was used to transport huge quantities of arms into South Africa. *A documentary, The Secret Safari, on this truck can be seen on http://youtu.be./foqURw31gmc)* ?

You remember the SADF raid took place in 1985 in Botswana – well, many comrades were killed. In the TRC documents, you'll see one of the objectives of the raid was to identify four specific individual targets and I was one.

It was you, Tim Williams, Patrick Rickets and Christian Pepani?

Yes, but fortunately we had intelligence information beforehand. It was at the height of tension and I was already living in a safe house, so obviously I was not attacked. Because of my security and it was just too difficult for me to

operate, it was decided I should leave Botswana temporarily. I went to Lusaka and was then sent to the UK for one year to go and become part of the Safari operation.

The Safari Truck now at Liliesleaf Farm Museum in Johannesburg

You then became a key coordinator of the Safari operations in Harare? That correct?

I spent a year in the UK helping on this. Rodney (Wilkinson) was actually physically putting the vehicle together and then creating the infrastructure back in Zimbabwe for my return to coordinate the activities, together with other comrades. Setting up the infrastructure meant we had to deal with how we could move the truck from East Africa to Zambia where it would be loaded with all the weapons and then into Botswana and then into the country. And we had to make sure that the weapons were cached inside the country, then inform Rashid who had moved from being Head of Special Ops to becoming Head of Ordinance in 1987.

I reported directly to Rashid as Head of Ordinance from Zimbabwe in terms of assisting him. Of course a lot of the weapons went to MK units and some to Special Operations units as well.

How is it that you neither your role nor Rashid's get mentioned in reports on the safari truck operation?

Yes. Rashid and I kept very low profiles. I don't think it was important to mention our roles because there were many other comrades who were also involved. It wasn't just the handful that were mentioned, for example, in that documentary (*The Secret Safari)*. Many other comrades sacrificed hugely and our roles wasn't something that we needed to pronounce.

What do you understand was the specific role of Special Ops as distinct from other MK units?

I think if you look at any liberation struggle and any armed struggle, you always have a unit of specialist cadres that conduct operations which have the maximum impact psychologically, emotionally and physically. They are highly sophisticated operations with high value targets. That is exactly what the role of Special Ops was and it is why it was called that. It is an elite unit that is

highly professional and highly trained to conduct these operations for maximum effect.

It takes major logistical and operational planning and developing an infrastructure that is capable of withstanding the onslaught of the enemy in many forms. I think if we were to look at what was going on in the country at that point, there was a huge demand of a critical mass that was being created internally within the democratic movement and underground political structures by organisations like the UDF, the trade union movement and general MK operations. Those actions of high value, high prominence, that Special Ops undertook reinforced the morale, the psychological strength and understanding of our people that we were capable of fighting against a very sophisticated military-political machinery, the apartheid state. We could hit at the heart of that.

It was also to show that we were in an incremental way increasing our ability to confront the state physically, militarily in the most sophisticated way, and that we were not just a ragtag army. We had the ability to conduct these kind of operations and we proved that. I think if you look at the kind of impact that it had on our people and also how it motivated other young people to join MK, it played a significant role.

I think that Special Operations had huge strategic value and it mobilised and catalysed many young people to join MK as well. In fact, after the successful operations the morale of those youngsters in the camps, those youngsters who were aspiring to fight, just increased significantly. It played a big role at what I call the strategic level.

Would you say it was one of the more effective units of MK?

Well, you can't compare, it's a two-sided coin. You cannot place a value on the heroic activities and actions of general MK units inside the country. But, of course, the the nature of the actions and their successes meant that Special Ops had a significant impact, not only locally, but internationally as well. I think it created a huge psychological impact in terms of making sure that the message got to the apartheid regime and the general white population, that we were capable of waging a very sophisticated armed struggle.

Which one or two of the operations that were carried out by Special Ops do you think were the most effective and why?

Immediately what comes to mind, and it had such a huge impact and was so much in the public eye, was Sasol. The others were the attacks on Voortrekkerhoogte and Koeberg. The attack on the Air Force Headquarters in

Pretoria was also very significant. If you look at just those four, they had a huge impact in motivating our people inside and outside the country. They had a huge impact on the morale of the SADF. The fact that we were able to get to the heart of both their military and economic infrastructure which were the motivating and driving forces of the apartheid state made an enormous impact.

These attacks were turning points. As I said, there were scores of young people after those incidents that left the country to join MK. So within a space of a few years, you had an MK that had thousands of young people joining. In the history of MK, Special Ops definitely has a special place and those individuals who died in those operations, some of them in the Matola raids, should be remembered as great revolutionaries and soldiers of uMkhonto. Of course, there were the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns and the early pioneers of Umkhonto we Sizwe that are very significant, but the young people who worked in Special Ops also need to be acknowledged as great MK leaders.

When you talk of the great revolutionary fighters, you think of Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail; and about the Sierra Maestra with Fidel Castro; and Amilcar Cabral in Guinea Bissau; and Samora Machel and Frelimo. They were fighting an all-out guerrilla war in the rural areas, but in our case it was the urban areas. But what they did was also a significant contributing effect on the liberation of our country, of course in conjunction with the other pillars of our struggle.

On the Pretoria bombing, were you aware of any controversy within the ANC's and MK ranks? If so, what were they?

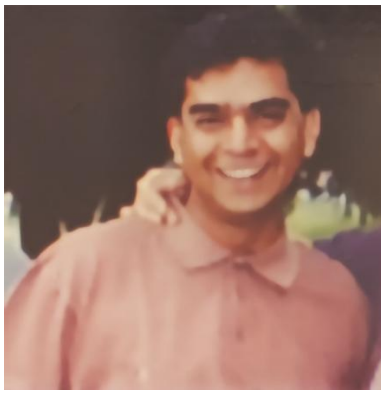
Well, look, there were civilians that were injured, but there were a significant number of SADF personnel who were also affected by that action. So my own view is that, as we have always said in MK, we need put politics as our primary source of motivation and the driving force behind our revolution. The military action is a complementary intervention that assists, that conscientises our people and at the time takes our war to the enemy. We have repeatedly said that we will never attack civilian targets for the sake of that because we were not a terrorist organisation, we were a revolutionary organisation.

Instances where there were casualties that were inflicted on civilians – and I don't know if this is going to be controversial – but that was collateral damage. The fact of the matter is that in a war civilians are injured or killed. But your primary target is the law enforcement agencies, the armed forces of the enemy – that has always been what has driven us. There was never an instance where deliberate decisions were taken to attack civilian targets. So my own view is that the controversy, if there was a controversy, may have centred around

attacking pure civilian targets, but if I recall, I can't see that there was a huge debate about that in the Pretoria bombing; it doesn't apply there.

And your views on the Magoo's Bar bombing?

Everything about Magoo's has been said and written. My own view is that the comrades were motivated because they felt that it represented a legitimate target.



Riaz Saloojee, in the 1980s

Okay. From what I can tell, Special Ops begins to peter out from '85 or so. Do you know why that may have been the case? There were other operations, but hardly as many and as effective as the first four year or so period.

I think in any struggle you have change and, of course, with change of individuals, of personalities in structures, they can also change. MK at that point was going through many structural changes as well in terms of how the organisation worked, with new different committees and different levels of hierarchy of decision-making. Rashid left Special Ops and became Head of Ordinance in '87. Mainstream MK activity was increasing as well. So you had many actions and more units operating in the country.

Personally, I think – not to be controversial – but there was a bit of a debate as to the efficacy of Special Ops continuing the way it was. Whether it was internal organisational or personality issues, I'm not sure. Maybe there were political tensions between the different elements that were conducting operations inside the country.

Rocky Williams said in an article that there were resentments from people in other units who felt that Special Ops did well simply because they were directly under Slovo and Tambo and got more attention and resources from the leadership. Maybe the other units felt that they could have done as well as, or even better than, Special Ops had they been given those advantages. Do you have any views on this?

I knew Rocky very well, so I understand what his thinking was and where he was coming from. Rocky obviously had a view as to how the military operates because that was his speciality. So whether it's in what we call 'conventional' or

'unconventional forces', if you have an element like a special forces entity or unit, by its very nature it is an elite. It has to be and that's why it's called Special Operations. It wouldn't be called that if it did not have that element of mysticism, if it did not have that element of secrecy to the highest end and if it did not have the capabilities that you give them to be able to operate at that level. Obviously their resources, their infrastructure would be very different from normal operations.

But you're right, from about '85 onwards the intensity or the critical mass with which Special Ops operated in terms of value targets had dissipated to a large extent. I think this was also because of a change in personnel. There were different competing interests in terms of accountability and this inevitably created tensions. It would be surprising if it did not create tensions. So I think the debates around Special Operations were rife at that point. Where was it going to and what was its real role going forward? There were talks about some kind of different structure that should be in place. So even from my own experience, you could see there was a tension that was building up around it.

When Rashid left, I think that was when things really started not being the same. To a large extent Rocky's right, but I do also think that there was a role and place for Special Ops at a particular historical point in our history and they played that role.

To what extent do you think the armed struggle contributed to the 1994 democratic breakthrough? To what extent do you think we were in a semi-insurrectionary situation in the mid to late '80s? And what is your response to the view that that if the armed struggle had continued for a bit longer, it would have changed the balance of forces in favour of the liberation movement and made for a more transformative post-apartheid agenda?

My own view, which I think is shared by many others as well, is that we were not fighting a classical guerrilla war. That's the first point. If you're a scholar of guerrilla warfare you'll understand that if you want to be a serious threat to a state, to have military impact, you need a critical mass of people where you are controlling territory. I don't want to go into the intellectual debate about it, but the fact of the matter is that we were fighting predominantly in the urban areas and we did not have a firm military base in a particular rural area or anywhere else. The second point is that these things are not mutually exclusive. The third point is that by its very nature in a revolutionary situation, the military has to be subordinate to the political environment, otherwise on its own it becomes a monster – and we've seen that in many instances, where revolutions went belly up because of the fact that the military was too influential.

The other point, is that the military impact the armed struggle had on the apartheid regime did not decimate large units of the apartheid security forces, it was not a sustained military onslaught against the enemy – but it did have a political and psychological impact and played a significant role in mobilising the masses and motivating them to continue with the mass struggle. The armed and mass struggles were complementary.

I will not say that MK military operations played the decisive role in overthrowing the regime. Definitely not. I think it would be naïve to think that could have happened. We weren't fighting the kind of guerrilla war that you saw in Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique or Guinea Bissau where you had large numbers of semi-conventional forces which were confronting the enemy forces. You have to understand the dynamics of our own urban environment as well.

I think from an ANC perspective, the underlying philosophy was politics dominated – and that's why you found a huge amount of effort put into the mass democratic movement, in the underground political structures and the trade union movement in broader society. MK was one small element of that.

Whether we should have continued the armed struggle, that's debatable. I mean Ho Chi Min said, when they were negotiating with the French, 'you negotiate from a positon of strength not from a positon of weakness'. I think if we look back historically and have a debate around whether it was right to suspend the armed struggle or not, whether we should have continued, it's a moot point now, but I don't think delaying the armed struggle would have had a significant influence on the outcomes.

Which of the Special Ops leaders that you know stand out for you and why?

Barney (Molokoane) and three or four individuals became symbols of MK. Their fearlessness and revolutionary zeal and commitment made them stand out. We used to always say look at what Solomon Mahlangu said before they hanged him, that his blood will nourish the tree of freedom. That was the spirit that imbued these people and their actions and they became symbols of what was best in those generations, what was best in the young people of our country in terms of being soldiers of uMkhonto we Sizwe.

I was a youngster in those days. When people spoke of people like Barney, it was with admiration that we spoke. You can mention a whole lot of them, but the ones who were killed are those that come to the fore. Those were the heroes of MK as well as many others, but they stood out because of the nature of their interventions and activities within MK.

It would have been interesting to see if Special Ops had continued in a more significant way who would have emerged as the new leader after Rashid left, especially in the changed material conditions. The raids on and deaths of key Special Ops comrades had an adverse impact on the unit's ability to continue in the way in which they worked – I think that their infrastructure was decimated at some point.

Riaz Salojee, post-1994, Sunday Times

What do you think of where the country and ANC are now?

You know, the ANC has gone through many difficult periods in its history, but I think with the transition from being a liberation movement to a government, coming into power, and the abuse of that power, we have reached the lowest ebb in the history of our organisation. Many of us have become extremely disillusioned with what is going on. I think when the new President came in there was hope that we could turn things around. We still hope that, but if there are no significant interventions which are decisive, if we do not correct our political failures with regard to how we implement policies and strategy we are going to go down. It's lip service and rhetoric to say we are people-centred. We are not people-centred.

If we do not create a proper civil service with competent people, if we do not end this corruption… I mean, you are familiar with all this, everybody talks about this, but the fact is that nothing's happening about it. Somebody was saying to me the other day, are you still a member of the ANC or still support it? The fact of the matter is that you don't just leave an organisation because it's going through a difficult period.

Whether we have the ability to correct what has gone wrong is going to be up to the kind of leadership that we install and the kind of leadership that we support going forward.

But right now, I think there is a feeling among many of us of an inability to come to terms with and grasp the reality of what has happened to this organisation. The further we allow it to slide, the greater our chances of an organisation with such a rich historical past, to diminish into something small – and that is the history of many organisations that have gone. And you can draw on the historical lesson. But then there are environments where people have been able to rectify. Again, I say, whether we have the wherewithal and the kind of leadership and commitment that is required of us right now, that we have the ability to correct it expeditiously, I'm not so sure.

It's not something that we can adapt to, it's not the lived reality we aspired to. Our lived reality is very different from what we thought was the project of creating a better human existence for our people and a quality of life for them. It is sad and when you reflect on it, you ask yourself was is worth it, going into the struggle? And then you think, yes absolutely. We are free today. But freedom is only what you make of it.

We cling to the historical correctness of what we did, and we hope that the generations of the new leadership that are coming – and things evolve, they don't remain static – that they will take things forward. Many new people have come into the leadership of this organisation, but whether they share the same sentiments and same views and values as our generations about how we need to transform our society and view our people, I'm not so sure. So we'll see.

If you knew then when you were in the armed struggle that things would pan out as they have now, would you have still done what you did?

From a political, moral, historical, personal perspective, there's no way that I would not have done what I've done. The conviction to serve my people, to serve my country, to create a better life for our people, that is unquestionable and it cannot change because it's historical, it happened.

If you're asking me would I have done anything different, no, definitely not. Where I think, obviously, people can say we should have done things differently, is at an operational level. Maybe we should have looked at this or that or something else.

But in terms of the overall commitment, the higher philosophical understanding of what we needed to do, that will never change. It was correct then and it is still correct now and it will always be correct.