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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Robert McBride

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Johannesburg (telephonically)

Of course, your background and MK role have been covered extensively in various publications and you might well be bored having to respond yet again to questions on this. But this interview is one of many with Special Ops comrades as part of a specific project on Special Ops as a whole – and yours and Gordon Webster's units are important parts of it. Perhaps you can, at least briefly, tell us a bit about your family background and the influence of your parents on your political awakening?

My parents were both teachers and we grew up in a ghetto, a former military barracks which was hastily built at the start of the Second World War. It was in the middle of an industrial area off Durban South, called Wentworth. It was a place declared for people who were classified as 'Coloured'.

We lived in a very impoverished and deprived community. My parents were teachers but they actually earned very little. And teaching was full of bureaucracy, which led to my father leaving and becoming an artisan in the petrochemical industry, which became advantageous later on during the struggle.

I am talking about the middle '60s to early '70s. I didn't particularly know that we were not well off or concerned about it. As I grew up, with a number of influences, came an awakening, as happened with thousands of other people, and you start reflecting on what is obviously an unjust and vicious system.

Key elements of influence on me were the students from the Alan Taylor residence at the nearby Black Medical School. The students reached out to our community and through pamphlets, books and meeting them we became politically aware. Some of those students are government Ministers today.

And then the different influences of my father and my mother. My mother had the softer but deeper influences – the issues of values, of doing what is right, of

eschewing cowardice and embracing honour. And my father taught me skills in a hard way, the issues of self-defence, and the importance of who you associate with.

We lived in a gang-ridden area as it still is now, and he was quite strict - no hanging about corners, be back home early, don't be a gangster and that sort of thing. So it was quite a strict routine I had.

When my father started his own little engineering business, I would work with him after school, and learnt boiler-making and welding skills, which would also play a role in the armed struggle later on in terms of how we transited weapons and banned literature in secret compartments we manufactured in cars.

And I have two sisters, Bonnie and Gwyneth.

Of course, I read a lot so I had a good idea of my environment. My speciality when I was a kid was reading Second World War books and studying people like Churchill. Then later on, my father moved me into more political books, but overall the cumulative effect was that he gave me a good idea of how the world operates.

As I came to the close of my teens, I then met up with Gordon Webster in college and he was another influence on me.

You may not have been different from the usual Wentworth family in material terms, but in other terms weren't you somewhat different? The average father in Wentworth was not like yours? At some stage your father interacted with communists in the '50s. Rostron (*Robert Mc Bride: The struggle continues)* says that your father would say that the only answer to Whites is the armed struggle. He was one of two so-called Coloureds who were accepted for medicine at Wits. He wasn't a typical Wentworth father?

My father was originally from Johannesburg and came across communists there. In his youth he lived in Albertville next to Sophiatown, and he interacted with a lot of people from there. People who also influenced him would be George Poonen (trade unionist and communist) and someone called Nicky.

Also bear in mind that before I was born, Mandela goes public in a BBC interview that the time had come for armed struggle.

Then over twenty years after that I have to now make decisions. We also had people in our communities being detained and brutalised and needing psychiatric counselling and therapy after detention. People who were committed to peace.

To cut to the chase, I was debating with my father when I was about 17 about the use of violence. My father raised the issue, and I have often quoted him in speeches that 'well the Gandhism which people are talking about, the *Satyagraha*, tell me, do you think that *Satyagraha* would have worked against Nazi Germany?'

And then he says to me how did the West, the Anti-Nazis, deal with them? They bombed the crap out of them – and that is the only thing that made them stop. And he drew from that analogy that in certain instances the very noble idea of *Satyagraha* would not work.

For *Satyagraha* to work, people have to have a similar moral value system as you, so that you can appeal to that. For example, in the Irish situation, if your neighbour offended you, you go and sit outside his gate and don't eat for days until he apologises even if it means you must die there. That is where the hunger strike started from hundreds of years ago.

So my father believed that you can only use moral persuasion or moral duress on people if they share your set of values. Where people saw you as subhuman – and I have been reading Richard Steyn on Smuts – clearly Smuts was a great leader and statesman - but he was a racist, as he saw Gandhi and Black people as much lesser than Whites. So, even Smuts, later viewed as a liberal, was a supremacist. And those are the issues: how do you stop people from seeing you as less than human? And this is the issue which comes to a head with Gordon and me during the beginning of the tri-cameral system (in 1994).

Was it that you turned to the armed struggle partly because of your mother's soft conditioning and your father's more direct interventions?

Yes.

So your parents were unusual then?

Yes.

I read somewhere that your father was quite upright and refused to offer any bribes to make headway when it was expected of him to? Do you think that may partly explain your anti-corruption stand?

Yes. And also, as I said when I was interviewed at his funeral recently, he was a comrade and freedom fighter in his own terms. And he happens to be my father. The reason I make that distinction is to take away any notion that I did not have a mind of my own in my decision-making.

My commitment to the fight against corruption is to a large extent based on the extent of suffering in this country. I discussed with my father just before he passed away: why should we change at the last minute, doing the right thing because this road is a little bit difficult to travel on? You have to stick to your principles. If the principles have cause, and they are right – and the whole world sees that your principles are right – why forsake them at the time when it is a bit difficult, when it is easier to take the bribe?

My view is a simple one. To me people have sacrificed and suffered, and so corruption cannot thrive unopposed. We have to oppose it with everything at our disposal. One of the reasons why we are having difficulty with Covid-19 now, is because we didn't have enough money to build the infrastructure of a proper health care system and much else. It's a lot of money that was wasted.
Why is there a shortage of houses or social facilities? Because money was wasted.

And that is one of the things which I learnt in Special Ops. That the money you have is not yours, it's the people's money, and you must account for it. And that, I was fortunate enough to learn from Rashid. As an underground secret organisation, a military structure, boy, we had to account for every cent we spent! Which at the time, as a young man, I found quite irritating – to have to come and account to Rashid, but I see the value of it now. Rashid was quite firm on that!

The issue of accountability, of not stealing, of getting value for money, of doing things right, I didn't get it from the studies I later did; I got it from within my Special Ops unit. And that's where I also got my commitment to work. In Botswana we worked twenty-four days moving weapons in the middle of the night, early hours of the morning.

You really work, your job is to work. You hardly have time to sleep. You have to eat on the road. And that commitment I got from Special Ops, that tenacity of purpose, that we are going to get things done. No amount of degrees I can get, will ever instill that in me the way in which Special Ops did.

So while I'm regarded as an ethics expert now, my grounding of my ethics comes from me belonging to Special Ops and having the Commanders that I did.

Your mother sent you to school in Kimberly in '76. That's when the school boycotts took place. Did that also contribute to your political consciousness?

The students' resistance to unequal education was brutally put down by the apartheid state. The community I was living in in Kimberley organised solidarity marches, which also resulted in confrontation with cops, with teargas and so on.

The baptism of tear gas is very critical in the lives of a lot of activists. Two things it showed me. First, a community can organise around any issue and once organised and united, it's difficult to defeat them. Second, the authorities had no hesitation in using brute force against us. So it's all part of the formative process of moving directly into the armed struggle.

Did the gangster culture of places like Wentworth contribute to toughening you up and, in a way, make it easier for you to turn to the armed struggle?

Yes. I would say it played a role in that you faced danger every day and if you refused to bow to the whim of gangsters, you became targeted, and you had to walk the gauntlet every day. It's like going through a furnace so you get tempered and stronger. What you also learn is to know yourself, your own fears, your own abilities and the limits to your abilities. You also learn to survive within a dangerous environment. It's not a nice thing to go through, but you live in that environment, and you have to survive in it – and that's what it is.

So, beyond the 1976 students' uprising what's the next significant political activity you are drawn into?

Well, it's the 1980 student boycotts.

You were offered a place to do engineering at the University of Natal?

Yes.

So you must have done very well in school despite all your distractions…

I would put it differently. I would say of the people who did well in my class, I probably did the least well. I just made it to get in.

I read that you left because you couldn't fit in at a mainly White university?

Well no, I was not coping with the standard and pace of the work. University is about having a lot of time. Traveling for us from and to Wentworth was taxing – walking down Francois Road at seven o'clock in the evening or trying to get buses that were all full. Your time is taken away and by the time you reach home you are unable to apply yourself properly. So, it's a combination of money, my inability to cope and too much that was going on in the world, I suppose, that led me to drop out.

So what drew you to teaching?

Well, sometimes you find your destiny on a road that you tried to avoid. I worked as an artisan – an instrument technician at Sasol. I gave my mother all my money, and she opened up a little tuck-shop that became a take-away. But it was important to have an education and I didn't want to be in a dead-end for the rest of my life so I went to Bechet College. That's where I met Gordon.

But you were first drawn to BC (the Black Consciousness movement)?

Yes.

So, what drew you away from BC to a more non-racial orientation?

I think BC is almost a logical precondition for non-racialism because the real ethic of BC is self-belief. The issue of being black, you will not care how you look; you are not less than anybody else. You cannot be in a non-racial environment if you think you are inferior. You can't have feelings of low esteem.

It's an attitude that even irritates my comrades now, but why? And they have translated it as arrogance, but I have never believed that I am less than anybody else at the freedom table. And I come there on my own terms based on my own credibility. You cannot be part of a non-racial struggle unless you believe in yourself and don't believe yourself inferior to anybody else. And BC developed that.

To what extent, if at all, did Gordon influence you to turn towards non-racialism?

I wouldn't say he played a role in that. Already the phenomenon of non-racialism had manifested again by the formation of the UDF (United Democratic Front) and my viewing the experience of people working together. That Tsunami of energy of non-racialism at work is really what drew me in. The power of non-racialism was overwhelming.

The UDF also diluted forms of regionalism by working across the country with people of all races in a strong, confident, assertive manner. So I seamlessly moved into non-racialism. It was a logical consequence of where I came from.

You could have been active in the UDF and its mass struggles. What led you into the armed struggle specifically?

There were a number of UDF activists in Wentworth who were detained and beaten up. Some of them were in college with us. Some of them came out quite disturbed. Whatever happened to them, Gordon and I decided that we are not

going to be victims. For doing nothing, you get tortured. So if we are going to get tortured we might as well do something useful. It was simplistic youthful discussions.

We saw the tri-cameral system as a trick to get us into the apartheid army to help oppress our fellow South Africans. That meant picking up a gun for the apartheid army - and we said no ways we're going to do that. The tri-cameral system was a critical moment for us. Gordon asked me a question one day: 'How can you have a law that gives me a vote but denies it to my mother? What kind of society makes me human and my mother less than human?'. (Webster was classified 'Coloured' and his mother 'African')

And that thing hit me like a kick in the face because I am just one generation away from the exact situation he's in. So, the decision was to go into exile and join the ANC's armed struggle. Those of us who joined the armed struggle were normal people and we were caught up in an entire generation across the world which was resisting oppression and autocratic governments. So, it wasn't like South Africa was some aberration, where a few hotheads got together and decided to carry out acts of revolutionary violence.

We were part of this international movement towards a more equal, a more gentle society. We had come out of BC and 'Viva Frelimo' and the liberation of Mozambique and Angola. Zimbabwe's was a mostly military fight. By 1979, 70% of the countryside was controlled by the guerrillas.

It became inevitable, there was never a time when I was convinced that fighting against the racist pro-Nazi apartheid system, that crime against humanity, could be done solely through non-violent means.

Why did you not leave with Gordon for training?

My mother had been sick for some time and a day or so before we were supposed to leave my father also got sick. In good conscience I couldn't leave them while they were both sick, so I stayed behind.

Before Gordon gets back you get involved in some armed activities?

Yes.

Why would you attack Fairvale High School? That's a school for working class and poor children in Wentworth?

Well, the aim there was not really to attack. The place had been falling apart and year after year the parents had asked for repairs to be done. It was one of the

first cardboard schools, as we called them. It was made out of a few columns of brick and plywood.

Once the rains come, those classrooms start rotting. The paint peels and the insects start eating it away. The authorities didn't want to fix it up. A whole wall in the girls' toilet was down and no one had the decency to fix it up. And that tipped the scales for us. You have to make a statement.

Of course, we were reading ANC literature now, and the ANC was saying you have to involve yourself in people's struggles at the grassroots, and you have to try and mobilise and organise people because an organised people can't be defeated.

So, we were trying to make a statement with Fairvale School, it was a type of home-grown armed propaganda, if you could put it that way.

What did you use? Petrol bombs? What was the effect?

Petrol bombs. It was a spectacular failure (laughter). If anything, the failure made it incumbent upon us to get training.

But after we were imprisoned, they built a whole new school. Somehow the authorities realised even in their own minds that the neglect was obscene.

Was there another attack on a school during the time you were in Special Ops?

No, that was before I became part of Special Ops when I was helping the 'Doctors Unit'. There was a Whites-only by-election in the Bluff and the comrades in charge decided they wanted to sabotage the election station before the election.

I had to pick up people in Lamontville, not knowing what for, and drop them off at Alan Taylor Residence. That night the explosion went off. I never saw those people again and I had lost contact with the unit. Gordon came back soon after.

So when Gordon gets back in November 1985 after being away for several months, you join his MK unit and he starts training you?

The first training Gordon provided was basically theory over about a month. We would meet every two or three days. We also discussed other struggles, especially the Vietnamese case, and why there is a need for the involvement of the people and to link the armed activities to people's problems.

Then we went to Botswana a number of times to get different training. Also Rashid wanted to hear my ideas of how I could bring equipment into the country

because when Gordon went back to report to him, he had told him what I advised because our plan was to expand the armed struggle towards people's struggle.

When were you told you were part of Special Ops unit of MK specifically?

After the first two weeks when Gordon first came back from exile he explained that we were in the ANC and MK and this is what is required of you. 'You will not get any medals. You will not get paid any money. You will probably die. Tell me now are you in or out. Go and think about it. I will come back to you in two weeks.'

He was testing the water because he hadn't seen me for a few months. He was very disciplined and cautious and he did it step by step. But I was keen.

Because the township was rough, I always carried a weapon, but when I told Gordon I was in, he threw it away, and said 'from now on we don't carry weapons unless in operations. So keep yourself out of any kind of altercation, just walk by any potential trouble. You must actually socially disappear.'

After the first two weeks since he asked me to join MK, he told me that I was in Special Ops – and I was a bit blown. He said the decision has been taken now to step up activity, move towards arming the masses and this is what is required to be done. So you would have your armed propaganda operations going side by side with recruitment and training inside the country.

That was a key issue. The cost of taking people out in terms of security, manpower and resources, training them for a few months and then bringing them back meant you could not get momentum on the armed struggle. So, you had to start training an army inside and build up the momentum on the armed struggle.

The key focus now was on one person going out, getting trained, coming back and training others. That was happening in Western and Eastern Cape and maybe other provinces.

Robert McBride in the 1980s, Independent Media

What is your understanding of the specific role of Special Ops as distinct from other MK units? Were you told to focus on specific types of targets?

Well no, not specific targets, but our mission was to disrupt the energy grid.

So that is why we did oil pipelines, oil storage, electricity power grid pylons, substations and power stations. The real reason for

Special Ops was to ensure policy changes could be felt immediately on the ground – so if the ANC took a decision we had to act on it with military support.

One of the first operations we did was on 9 January 1986. We were the first unit to respond to Tambo's January 8 Statement about the *Year of Umkhonto we Sizwe* with the aim to escalate the armed struggle. The call was 'every patriot a combatant, every combatant a patriot'.

The operation in which (senior security policeman) Colonel (Robert) Wellman subsequently died, was really giving effect to Tambo's call to step things up. And the infrastructure of our unit was all home-grown – so our initial activities from August '85, before Gordon came back, helped us to get ready. A lot of people were trained internally and the support structures were internal. We also interfaced with some of the internal support systems of the UDF. So we had kind of completed the circle of the 'fish in the water' approach of guerrillas.

Special Ops was located in the President's office so that we could move quickly with operations. We could avoid the long communication and logistics lines. We could just get calls from outside to act – and act immediately. There was very good synchronising, we adapted quickly, more than any other unit.

What training did you get in Botswana?

I was trained in landmines, anti-personnel mines, limpet mines and how to handle a RPG – but I didn't practice firing a shot in the desert. Much of it entailed showing me how these things worked and explaining what would happen, and I would take copious notes and repeat what I learnt to the others. Very basic training.

I was also trained how to set up armed caches and do coordinates so someone else can pick up the arms afterwards. This included taking photos with an instant camera and being able to give reference points so the caches can be located. Also, how to remove the topsoil first and put it to one side and make sure you put the topsoil back last, so no disturbance in the soil could be picked up.

So who did the training?

It was Oupa, that is T-man (real name: Ernest Pule) and Chris (real name: Lester Dumakude). Later it was also Victor (Molefe, real name: Johannes Mnisi). There were others.

When did you tell your father that you were in MK?

Even before Gordon left, my father was aware that we intended joining. He was supportive of that, though he said 'I suppose you're aware that they will hang you for this and you've reconciled yourself to it'. Of course, when we were in prison, he reminded me of this.

Rostron says your father only got to know because you drew him in to go to Edendale Hospital?

You've got to remember that Rostron wrote the book thirty years ago.

MK operative Rocky Williams says there was some resentment towards Special Ops from other MK units because they felt it got special attention by OR and Joe Slovo and more money and resources than them. There's also a view that it cherry-picked targets and spent a long time planning so it could be more effective. It was said that if the other units had the same opportunities, they could have done just as well as Special Ops. Do you have any views on this?

Firstly, Special Ops was value for money. We were told to do certain things by certain dates and we got them done. From start to finish, from '79 until we disbanded, we were never more than a hundred people in Special Ops in total.

Most of the people died in action. The strength of Special Ops was that it targeted select people to recruit, people who had gone through various levels of sifting. It is not just anyone that came in there. So, it had people with the wherewithal.

I think none of the other MK units was denied choosing its targets or planning for them or getting weaponry needed. With us in Special Ops we were structured, we were organised, we were motivated and we had a tenacity of purpose. I suppose we went about it from day one as business unusual and that is what distinguished us from others.

But the extent of perhaps resentment towards us came about through a number of times with other units claiming our operations. We had to write reports to our Commander to say we did that operation and he would report that to the Political Military Council (PMC). It goes back to (Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde revolutionary leader) Amilcar Cabral's 'tell no lies, claim no easy victories'.

We actually got the business done. We did operations which the enemy – who thought us inferior – did not believe we could do. Remember, you're dealing with how people of one colour view people of another colour.

The operations were spectacular and we hit places that were inaccessible and our intelligence gathering ability was good. Because of different layers of networks, we were able to benefit from what the ANC civilian intelligence was picking up.

In one case through this networking and pooling of resources, we were able to save Rashid's life. I was already in prison but we picked up the security police's plans to deal with Rashid through an informer.

Was that the McKenzie case?

Yes. So, there was very little infiltration into Special Ops. McKenzie came the closest to it, but the damage he did was negligible. So years of work by the security branch were blown by the way Special Ops and in particular our Commander worked.

The Commander moved around a lot, was committed, took the necessary care but kept in touch with all dimensions of the struggle to know what was going on.

And there was no piece of equipment that was too big for us to move into the country. We wouldn't look at a problem and say, wow it's so big, how can we do it? We would find a way to get the material in. If the dimensions of it were too big, we found a way to put it in our vehicles. We smuggled human beings right under the nose of the security forces.

Rocky also suggests that while the Special Ops operations were spectacular, they were elitist and didn't necessarily link up or contribute to escalating mass struggles. Your response?

I think whoever said that is talking nonsense. I can say that with authority because I was on the ground and I know. So on one occasion we planted four explosives on the same night. We had to retreat and I had to drop Gordon off, but we had been delayed because another guy in the unit had to be dropped off first. So, we landed up in Lamontville township.

Sitting in the car, the first explosion went off and everybody came out of their houses, first in bewilderment and curiosity, and then the second one went off, and then they started singing and dancing in the street. Hundreds of people from what I could see. And the third one went off and it was as if we were at a rock concert with all those people.

And then the fourth one went off and then it was just jubilation. That surely is not evidence of a Special Ops unit being separated from the masses!

In fact, it is precisely those high level operations that were within earshot, where in some cases people could even see the explosions, that gave them hope that one day there will be freedom, there will be liberation. They felt that there are committed people who are fighting for us. In fact, Lamontville became one of the most active townships in the country in terms of MK. It is really a tiny place, but it became one of the most powerful townships in terms of the civic and other organisations. People knew there were ANC and MK activities and this inspired the mass struggles and organisations.

Clearly no one knew if it's Special Ops or some other unit that carried out an operation. People wanted to hear the explosions because it made them feel good, it empowered them. For a long time the African population was completely demilitarised, came nowhere near guns, was completely defeated. Now to have Black people handling sophisticated technology hitting apartheid targets and causing explosions, that on its own was uplifting.

My instructions specifically were to get weapons to the masses, in addition to these other targets. How do we do that without exposing ourselves? That was an issue that we were caught up in all the time.

When others didn't come through with their operations, Special Ops always did. And that is not to say we were perfect. If there is one criticism I have of Special Ops, it is that maybe we shouldn't have been so cautious, we should've had many more operations. I mean, we were told by the Commander because of his proximity to the decision-makers, that there were whispers of possible negotiations and so there was a strategic position that we should escalate the operations but not to the extent that it would undermine the prospects of talks with the regime.

I think that we didn't get the balance right between escalating enough and not escalating operations too much that they'll hold back talks. But thank God for it because we were on the side of caution.

Even in Mandela's time, they didn't want the sabotage operations to go too far, get out of hand; they wanted it controlled, structured, organised. I think perhaps we in Special Ops did not have that balance right.

Even after 1990 when the remnants of Special Ops assisted comrades in the SDUs in the townships against the attacks by apartheid surrogates, the idea was to defend – but don't go on the offensive against these guys even though we then had the material to do it. That was drummed into me because I was responsible mainly for the East Rand after coming out of prison.

What if your critics said your experience in Lamontville shows the excitement, the lifting of people's morale, people came out onto the streets and were *toyi-toying* (dancing expressing a political point), but does that convert into mass organisation and mass power? Or is it the adulation of the masses for the sophisticated elite MK comrades who were going to come and liberate them? What would you say in response to that?

No MK operation on its own automatically leads to growth of mass power and organisation. It's a cumulative effect. Remember, we have our four pillars of the struggle and this included UDF mass struggles on the ground complemented by the armed activities.

It was no coincidence that Durban South was always a hotbed of MK activity. It's an industrial zone, and you have working class people there. It also became the most organised area because the military and mass struggles – also with organised labour – were working together. Very often MK people belonged to organised labour also and mass struggles surreptitiously. So, it wasn't only MK, but each cog in the machine had to play its part.

One of the biggest fears we had was to be caught with a lot of material that hadn't been used. So rather it explodes and even if it explodes in an operation which our critics will say is pathetic, it was fine.

Leaving out the *Magoo's* operation for now, of the others you carried out, with and without Gordon, which two or three do you think were the most effective and why?

Well, the first one, in which Colonel Wellman got killed. That was a substation and became a kind of signature of ours. There would always be a booby trap left at every one of our explosions. That would also make police hesitate to respond to the situation and pick up trails and maybe track us down – because at times we had to be a distance away from the car when we had to return from a substation or power station or transformer or any other target.

So the police would purposely, you found out later, take long to arrive on a scene because of a fear of a booby trap. That set the tone for us.

The other operation that stands out is where we blew up the main crude oil line that was feeding the Mobil Refinery. That was very effective in its simplicity. In terms of reconnaissance over a number of years, people had tried to locate the pipeline. But it was in such an obvious place – it comes from the sea and then goes under the ground but then it must cross a canal to go to the oil refinery. That operation was spectacular.

Derrick McBride, Independent Media

And of course there was the Edendale rescue mission when we got Gordon out of Edendale hospital while he was in detention after having been shot trying to escape from the police when they tried to arrest him.

Clifford Brown and his comrades tried to hit the oil refinery but unfortunately got killed in a skirmish with the police. Do you know anything about what happened there?

That's right. We were about two years after them.

So how did you find the pipeline target?

Remember, my dad worked in petrochemicals in these two refineries. So he knew and I had spoken to other comrades who he worked with before I was in the ANC. And my father told us where the pipeline was. It didn't go underneath the ground there, so it has to come up and then it goes across. He explained that it has what they call 'non-return valves' every about 500 metres, which limit the whole pipeline being affected by an explosion in one part.

But the key issue was that it was in line with our overall strategic objective to disrupt the energy grid and the amount of energy that would be lost even within the 500 metres was worth a lot of money. Also, there was the propaganda value of a big conflagration. And that operation made it to the front page of a British newspaper as part of the escalation of armed activities in the country. This was soon after the Eminent Persons Group (a Commonwealth delegation) visited South Africa and failed to get Botha to change his direction. There was a general upscaling of MK operations after that.

In the Wellman case, you intended the two limpet mines to go off fifteen or so minutes apart? As part of hitting both electricity and security personnel targets?

That's correct, yes. And in subsequent operations, we did the same.

Now, you brought some innovation into the use of limpet mines?...

An amazing thing about limpet mines, I only found out later, is that they can be dismantled. You kind of screw in the detonator and fuse and if someone gets there in time they can then defuse it by unscrewing it. So, we made all our explosives un-defusible. An explosive of ours will definitely go off. We used epoxy weld to screw it in so it could not be deactivated.

But through a subsidiary of an arms manufacturer the security forces later made a device which was under a spring which bit into the fuse to catch the firing pin of the limpet mine so it can be safely removed. So, they spent millions of Rands doing research on and manufacturing a device that defuses the limpets that we rigged. I only found that out later. It was an amazing device – it had like very sharp teeth that they put over the fuse part of the limpet mine and then it would set off and bite in and capture the firing pin before it struck the detonator.

Some of your substations operations plunged Wentworth into darkness. Why do that in a working class township? Would this not alienate the Wentworth community from the ANC? Why not do it in a privileged middle class area?

Well, we also did the other places, like Westville later. In some ways Wentworth as a community – not the activists there – was removed from the ANC and the armed struggle. The ANC was something far away in the bush, not close to them. Hence it was important to have the armed propaganda there, to let them know the ANC was around and that they needed a better life and should have hope in the future. If there is no hope, there is hopelessness. People will not be interested in the ANC.

And we had to show the power of MK because, trust me, the shockwaves from an SPF limpet mine are quite powerful. I mean you feel it. It shakes you to the core. The fact is that that first operation that affected Wentworth where a cop was killed and others injured was carried out by people who the government believed are inferior. So, it was largely of propaganda value, and also we were in the industrial heartland of Durban South.

After Clifford Brown and them tried to hit the oil refineries, they had a high tensile steel fence put around them to prevent RPGs coming in. When we make a move they have to make a counter-move, but it costs them every time. There is new security. Where do they recruit security from? From the townships ultimately. Where do we get information? From those same people.

The propaganda value was in showcasing MK's abilities. For example, there was an alarm at the Wentworth substation that set off a response team. The city council created an anti-terrorist team. So, it wasn't an easy target, but we did it successfully twice within six weeks. You have to also express a sense of audacity, I suppose the Yiddish word would be 'chutzpah', in our operations. There has to be an amount of daring because you are dealing with how people view you.

Obviously we also had to respect the skills of the security forces, some of them were quite professional, so we didn't just take them for granted. In the '85-'86 period, they had to call reinforcements from all over the country to come and

uncover this new way of operating that they found. It was affecting their morale. Colonel Wellman was the Head of Security Branch for Port Natal. After the operation where he, unfortunately, died, they stepped up security and yet it was hit again. There was pressure from the politicians to stamp this out. 'Find these people, what's wrong with you? You are you useless!' they were scolded.

So, they brought in people from the Northern Transvaal, including General Bertie Steyn, to command overall to find us. There were a few colonels, captains and warrant officers under him. The shifting of resources from one front to another cost a lot of money. The fact they got us in the end is okay – but we used that as propaganda purposes also.

However, I am not sure how it was interpreted outside, but for me alone in my cell for many years thinking about it, I came to realise the enormity of what we did and the impact of it would stay in the hearts and minds of people, maybe not in their actions, for a long time to come. No matter what happens to us, the foundation had been set. Nobody can say afterwards we didn't know.

Apart from the superglue on the limpet mines, your unit was also unusual in that you did many of the DLBs in the vehicles yourself instead of relying on the comrades in exile?

Yes.

Presumably this came from your experience of panel beating through your father? But it wasn't just that you did these DLBs yourself, they seemed to be extremely good…Can you tell me a bit about how you got to do these DLBs?

Well, you complement different skills that you have and ways of doing things and improving. For example, the later issue of the Safari truck came from earlier discussions I had with Rashid. The Safari truck started after I was imprisoned. (*This was a truck taking safari tourists from Lusaka to South Africa that transported large amounts of arms hidden in secret compartments, unbeknown to the tourists. A documentary on this, 'The Secret Safari,' can be viewed at https://youtu.be/foqURw31gmc*)

Was the Safari truck your idea?

No. Not the Safari truck.

You introduced DLBs in a caravan?

Yes. The Safari truck idea was just a derivative of the caravan idea. Rashid and I discussed the idea. He said how can you have a cover of being permanently on holiday while doing MK work – we have to get around. That's when the idea came up to set up a front company that specialises in holidays but it never went further than that.

But the first to move people and weapons in and out of South Africa in a holiday mechanism, a caravan, was our unit. We had to deal with a logistical problem: how do you get around without attracting suspicion? One of the ways was with a caravan, which we did successfully on a number of occasions.

So, I can imagine that it evolved from there. I didn't say Safari truck to them, but I can imagine Rashid, being resourceful and brilliant, would have come to that idea putting together the different ideas. Of course, with the Safari truck they developed the idea further – and, of course, the bigger the vehicle, the better and easier it is to conceal stuff.

Did you actually put a dead letter box in the caravan that you initially rented as well?

Well, it wasn't a permanent one. You put it in and remove it afterwards.

For the Jacobs attack, you went on foot and didn't use a car. Why?

Well, a car will get noticed, its number plate gets noted. When you are walking on the ground wearing a worker's overall at night, no one notices you.

Tell us a bit about the Pine Parkade operation and why?

It was a false bomb tied with a lot of wires that wouldn't explode. The Pine Parkade was owned by Anglo-American, with very tight security. The EPG was in South Africa negotiating for the release of Nelson Mandela and the start of political talks. But the government instead attacked the frontline countries to show they weren't interested. They believed a resolution to the country's problems could take place without the ANC. They refused, I think, (Olusegun) Obasanjo (former Nigerian President) to see Mandela.

In response, we decided on this propaganda decoy device to show that the ANC can't be excluded from any talks about the future of the country. It was to bring attention to the ANC's presence in South Africa. The device didn't have a detonator, but the purpose of putting the wires there was actually a bit of a joke, let them rather cut the different wires and see where they get to. There was even a suggestion we should leave a little note for them to say 'wrong way' or 'go back' and things like that. So, there was a sense of humour attached to it together with

the strategic importance of signalling that you can't exclude the ANC, we are here. It was a successful operation because the headlines the next day was 'ANC bomb in city centre'.

I read that Rashid at some stage asked you to spread your operations beyond Natal? Did he? If so, why?

Yes, I think it's because we were able to react quickly and consistently. If we were asked to put something together, even an operation from scratch, we could do it. So if they needed something done quickly they knew they could get it done with us. I think you must just use the resources that you have – and we did.

At one stage, I was asked, listen, can we pull you out for a couple of months and send you for missile training since you are able to move big things in? I said I'd prefer to continue doing what I am doing. I was in a good place, in a good zone and enjoyed working for the organisation inside the country and making things work. So I missed out on an opportunity of a holiday to the Soviet Union (laughter).

Apart from the Dolphin unit, I think you were the only Special Ops unit based inside the country. And I think that's what Special Ops and other MK units were aiming for – to have internal units instead of carrying out hit-and-run operations through units based outside. Maybe that's why Rashid asked if you could spread your operations beyond Durban and Natal then?

That would be one of the reasons, but Rashid would know better.

Subsequently I became aware of secret talks and talks about talks so I would imagine instructions may have come through the NEC or from Tambo to spread operations to inactive areas and show the regime they need to hasten towards negotiations.

I think that Rashid and them always wanted to know how come these guys with limited training can be so effective? What were we doing right? How can we spread that elsewhere? There were constant questions.

A lot of our time was spent trying to get our heads around doing things better. I think if a unit works well you want to take that successful formula to other areas and build up a national network.

As good as your operations were, don't you think you may have done too many operations in too short a space of time and so got caught too soon? Would you not have been more effective if you had fewer

operations and survived for a longer period? Related to this, how planned were your operations? It seems some of them were done, well, off-the-cuff, if you like, maybe even impulsively? Not that that's necessarily wrong…

Firstly, nothing is perfect. For example, your British Special Air Services have a saying which is bandied about all over the show 'who dares wins'. That is a tenet of combat and risky missions, and not everybody survives war. The issue is to create a crisis for the regime and it's about self-sacrifice.

Remember part of our armed struggle strategy was armed propaganda, the aim of which is to awaken people and give them hope. That's really it. So how do you create hope by doing nothing?

I mean, we could have chosen stupid targets like telephone poles and sat back and felt good, and we would probably be sitting in some fat positions now because we did some ineffective operations and did not put ourselves at risk. Some people who hold positions today – their only claim to fame is that they were arrested.

You can't have the awakening of people through armed propaganda without risk, daring, audacity. You have to have audacity, not recklessness. The fact that we could do things quickly is because we had an infrastructure in place. Gordon and I used buses and taxis a lot to identify targets. He would sit on one side of the bus and I on the other side and we would keep our eye out for targets.

The overall strategic objective was, as I said, to disrupt energy supply. That is what we went about. We were not a wealthy organisation. I always make the point that there is no difference between a missile fired from an aeroplane at a target and a car bomb, the only issue is the mechanism of delivery, and in some instances the car bomb is more accurate.

In MK we didn't have an aeroplane, and it is a statement I made, I think, at the Truth Commission, well, our intelligence could've been faulty, we didn't have a billion Rand intelligence budget like the apartheid regime, we had to deal with what we had, but we had to resist. We can't say we're in a war, in an armed struggle and do nothing, which other comrades did. They were allocated big amounts of weapons but did nothing.

It's a risk, it's a balance. The moment you decide to go for training and you become a member of MK you can die any time, depending on where you are deployed. We were resigned to that. We knew we were going to die. So, if you know you are going to die and in any case it is fait accompli because of the type of operations you do, we needed to step up operations.

Also, the beginning of our operations coincided with the end of the 'Durban Thirteen', 'the Doctors' operations. The capture of those comrades was a major defeat for the ANC, so it was important to continue.

We were quite consistent in the way we did operations. For example, the decision to rescue Gordon from Edendale Hospital, it could not have been planned because we didn't plan for him to be captured, but when he was captured we had to improvise. We had to make a plan. Yes or no? We thought yes, but we didn't just go ahead, we went first back to Rashid and said this is the story, can we do it? And we were given extra resources to do it – and then we did it. But we did it in less than 10 days from the time Gordon was captured.

One of the key reasons was that they had scored a propaganda coup against us by capturing Gordon and all the weaponry. The Minister of Law and Order – I think it was Le Grange – made a statement in Parliament and they were making lots of noise about this, including in the media. One day they were saying how the ANC had been hammered and the next day they wore red faces because this captured 'terrorist' had been rescued in a spectacular fashion and had since disappeared. Ours was a counter-propaganda move.

I believe that in the camps, for example, people were so excited they were firing tracer rounds into the sky because it was the first time this had been done. The Commanders had to exercise serious discipline to get them under control.

I take the criticism that sometimes the decisions might have appeared impulsive, but imagine if no operation went off on 21 March 1986. Also, there was a contention as to who owns 21 March. The PAC like to say it's theirs. But we have to associate with all struggles and so on.

Similarly *Magoo's*, *Why Not*, was specifically on 14 June, not 16 June, because that date was exactly one year after the South African Defence Force raided Botswana and killed people. But, of course, it was also the tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising.

Why do you think there weren't many MK operations after the 'Doctors unit' got arrested? Why were there not more MK operations in Natal generally?

Firstly, with the arrests, the contacts were broken with the outside Commanders and there were problems with the long lines of communication. At the same time, the Swazis were acting against our comrades there. There were a number of assassinations, kidnappings and arrests there, with the Swazi police working with the apartheid security forces. Swaziland had also signed its own Nkomati Accord secretly with the apartheid regime.

I don't know the real reasons, but what I do know is that a wave of people left the country after we were captured. They went to join MK, and I think our operations contributed to that.

Do you think that to some extent the presence of Inkatha also explains why there weren't more MK operations in Natal?

My understanding is that there were other units operating also. I haven't had my eye on that, I haven't studied them because I haven't had a need to do this before. My understanding was that operations continued after our capture. I know in Wentworth, there were operations done at the Magistrate's Court, the Post Office and a few other places. I never got to know who that unit was, but there were some good operations done.

From what I've read, it seems that you recruited people into your unit almost flimsily, maybe almost impulsively?

I don't know who wrote that, but from day one, people started writing crap. You don't walk up to a stranger in the street and recruit him or her. You've got to know something about who you intend to recruit. The approach and the timing are always important. The dilemma is: do you approach people who are politically active and known, and therefore under the eye of the Security Branch, or do you take someone who you know is in a different space but is trustworthy from your own assessment, and you kind of know their innermost feelings about the situation in the country. So, the choice is between politically active or politically aware and not active. What's safer?

So, you recruit those you know best, who have themselves spoken about the situation in the country, not knowing who you were over a long period of time. Then you say to them, listen this is the situation, are you in or out? Two people said no. One said I support you fully hundred percent but I'm too scared to do this; I can do anything else.

A second one said he'll wait until the revolution comes. I said, well, the revolution has arrived. Even today I respect him because he was quite open. So, not every approach is possible. I don't understand the armchair analysts; we were not playing soccer, we were engaged in revolutionary warfare, we were going to kill people or get killed.

So, it's not a soccer match and you have a review where you're sitting in the stands and say he should've passed the ball then, or rather kicked the ball back. You have to get things going with the limited amount of resources, experience, skills.

You know, a few days before my sentencing some very important people had spoken to my advocates in some cocktail party that I was in Durban just handing out guns to every Tom, Dick and Harry. That person is a well-respected commentator and lawyer, but that was bullshit – and he was not even involved in our trial. But that's the stereotype, like saying 'Coloured people-gangsters-alcohol-guns-and-knives'. That's how they viewed me.

Even now people are quite surprised that I am not what they have made me out to be. But long ago, I had gone past it and have realised that other people's weaknesses and stereotyping do not change me. I know what the facts are. You can't change a bottle of water into a bottle of wine even if you vote that it's a bottle of wine when everybody knows its water. Water stays water. The truth doesn't change.

Let's come to the *Magoo's* and *Why Not* operation. What was your aim with these targets?

If you look at the TRC testimony from my Commanders, others who took part and me, and from people who had worked in those bars, the place was, in fact, a waterhole for security forces. In fact, one group used to ride motorbikes all the way from the then Transvaal and spend time there.

I think it's Helen Kearney who worked there, who said that she personally knew about 25 security guys who were there. She was never called at the trial, but she testified to this under cross-examination at the TRC. We had been saying this all along, but nobody wanted to believe us.

So when the operation happens, the Security Branch was worried about how we knew they go there? Who told us? They even arrested some of their own people and questioned them to try and find out.

There were two places they used to go to, the *Why Not Bar* and *The Barn* in I think the *Athlone* Hotel maybe. Our target was the security forces who went to the *Why Not Bar* and we make no excuses for that or using a car bomb there or in Pretoria or Witbank or anywhere else. By its very nature, a car bomb will always injure or kill people who are not the intended targets. It's a crossfire weapon. It wasn't the first time the ANC used a car bomb and neither was it the last.

All the weaponry given to me for that operation was meant for a car bomb and nothing else. I made a big mistake, which I'm glad I did. I took it on myself during the trial to protect the movement – and instead of my comrades saying, hallelujah, well done, they used that as a way to exclude me from appointing me

to positions after my release and after 1994. That's the ANC, not the old regime people, but my own comrades.

I had to wait for a number of years until we came to the TRC knowing fully what the truth is and yet being subject to abuse, encouraged by some of my own people. Some comrades befriended journalists who are otherwise seen as pro-ANC to have a go at me. And I had to shut up through all that period until the Truth Commission.

So, the testimonies of Rashid, Pule and the other comrades at the TRC were for me a healthy, enjoyable vindication. The mistake that I made at the trial was that I took the whole case on myself. I wanted to ensure that we protect the ANC, against the attacks by the apartheid government with their propaganda that we are a terrorist organisation.

If I had said *Magoo's* was on instructions from my Commander, I would have been nailed and so would the organisation. It was best for me to take it on my own shoulders and rather be the one being sacrificed. But instead of that being seen as bravery, later on it was used as a whip against me within the movement.

Anyway, as I said, we chose 14 June 1986 for the operation because of the apartheid government's attack on the ANC in Botswana on the same day in 1985 and to commemorate the 10th anniversary of June 16th. There was also a nationwide state of emergency declared on 12 June.

The equipment had to be picked up a few days before. I went to Botswana and returned on the 9th or the 10th, and I had about five days to put the operation together. So, it was a really short time.

Our aim was also to show the regime that they can't attack the ANC with impunity, that there will be a cost to bear, there would be consequences.

The security guys were worried when they captured us because they found that we hadn't used up all our car bomb-making equipment and they thought there might be another attack, maybe from another unit.

Post the ANC's 1985 Kabwe Conference, the rules had changed. If you look at *Sechaba* (ANC Journal), Kabwe was described as a Council of War - and the mood was very grim, angry, and it was decided there that we should show less restraint, that civilians will be caught in the crossfire. This is Tambo now talking. And for us it was, well, we were getting assassinated in Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Zambia itself – and none of us were wearing uniforms then. So, Kabwe changed the rules of armed struggle for us.

At first you were going to target the Natal Command HQ? Why didn't you go ahead with that?

Later on Rafiq Rohan tried to do it and the charge was close to where people were having a dinner, I think. But in an open flat area like that your explosive has very little effect. To be effective you'd need to get inside, you would need a suicide bomber, and that was not part of our method of operation. Anything on the side and the walls would be just really a waste of material.

The retreat, the open ground between Natal Command and the beach, is about 200 metres into the darkness and it's another 100 metres to the Blue Waters Hotel. That's what we looked at. Too much open ground and we'd be shot at in response.

On one occasion, we had wanted to put mortars on the beach and shoot those off from there and then disappear in the dark. The Natal Command had too many variables. Whereas the *Why Not* was easier to do.

Didn't you look into a car bomb at the Natal Command first?

Yes, but you couldn't park a car nearby and they were constantly patrolling.

Wasn't it also that you were not trained in mortars, Gordon was, and he was out of the picture then?

The Natal Command and *Why Not* targets were considered before Gordon was captured. To get mortars in would've been easy for me, but I had not been trained so I couldn't even propose that as an operation.

This has been covered extensively in other interviews but briefly what happened at *Magoo's* that night?

Greta (Apelgren) had to secure a parking space so we had to move around until we had a space. We parked in a fire hydrant place because ultimately that was the closest to the *Why Not.* The rest is explained by Matthew (Lecordier) and Greta at the TRC.

It was a 60kg bomb?

Yes.

Why is it that people talk of *Magoo's* when really the main aim was the *Why Not Bar* and it was more damaged than *Magoo's*?

I think *Magoo's* sounds more like a jingle, it sounds nicer. If you say *Why Not Bar*, for journalists it's boring, they want a catchy story.

Did you have no reservations at all about using a car bomb, as you suggest? Did Greta get it wrong when she said somewhere that when you were on your way back from Botswana with her in the car after you got the instruction to go ahead with the car bomb, you were quite down, and her sense was you were feeling very uneasy about the car bomb, that you had reservations about it? She seems to suggest that your mood was dark and negative?...

If you remember, it was after Kabwe and there was an attack on Lesotho. The response to that was the 'Doctors Unit' doing the Amanzimtoti operation. Even though comrade Andrew Zondi took the blame himself, he was given the instruction to retaliate. What this really meant is the change in policy in Kabwe had not been clarified yet. There were still some misunderstandings or different interpretations.

Now I don't want to put any blame on Rashid as my Commander when the instruction was given. Rashid was outside of the country. He wasn't on the ground to be able to take decisions according to specifics. But Rashid and I definitely discussed the possibility that people other than the security forces would die. My view was, look, I did my moralising when I joined ANC and MK, it's hypocritical of me to moralise now when I'm asked to do what the struggle required.

Whether I was in a down mood or not is irrelevant, and I'm sure it was important for Greta to mention all of that in the hope that some of my what she interpreted as mood or what my long periods of silence meant might help in mitigation of my sentence or with some public perceptions of me.

It's also important to understand that sometimes we want to remember things in hindsight, in retrospect, differently. But, for me, my mind was preoccupied with getting the operation done.

I don't want to make a song and dance about it. What I can say is that I never lost my humanity at any stage of being in the armed struggle. I've said to you also, I think some of our mistakes were that we did not escalate our operations sufficiently, we didn't get the balance right, but I think that also exhibits the level of our own humanity and those who ran the struggle, the leadership.

I can justify all our actions politically and I don't want to beat around the bush about what armed struggle and war means, and I take my authority from the way the French resistance fighters fought against the Nazis or how the people from the Warsaw Ghetto fought against them and how robust that combat was.

When people assess our actions, they cannot do so in isolation from the massacres that were being visited on our people on a daily basis in that period and the state of emergency, when you had about 9000 children under the age of sixteen in detention. It was an authoritarian Nazi state that we were in, and we had to fight against it. If there's any assessment done on how we responded to our oppression, it must take into account what our country was like then and what was done in similar places elsewhere to fight this sort of Nazism.

I mean, if you look at the British approach to the Nazis, for example, the bombing of Cologne and Dresden, the idea was not even to hit the factories or the soldiers but to hit ordinary people, to demoralise them so they stop supporting the Nazis.

Now, fortunately the ANC never took that position that the British Air Force took in the Second World War. But in terms of the morality of war, these are issues to consider. For me, I would say that while I can justify it politically and historically, I don't feel good that I took other people's lives at any stage. As a human being, I don't feel good that I took the life of a fellow human being, a fellow South Africa, but that is a luxury I can afford to talk about now. In the time of the suffering, the killing of our people, ours was a just war, it was a war against the war of White supremacy over others. That's what it was.

Magoo's bar operation, Independent Media

After the *Magoo's* operation, you and Greta go to Johannesburg in case the police were on your trail and you were thinking of going into exile in Botswana. Yet the Saturday after *Magoo's* you returned from Johannesburg to Durban, astonishingly, to carry out three operations, the Mobil oil pipeline in ank in Jacobs and in the city centre area. You did this with Matthew and Alan Pearce. Why did you go back to Durban when you were already in the process of possibly leaving for exile to Botswana?

Well, I thought it would be good to do some operations before I left. You have to get the balance right between your fear and your commitment to carry out operations. Do you run because you might be wanted or do you carry out operations because you are wanted? If you don't make it across the border you are going to get caught or killed. But in the process of retreating you have to carry out operations. In fact, I think we carried out two or three more operations during that period.

Well you did three on a Saturday evening.

Yes, but I think I also came back from Joburg again for another operation.

Why did you attack the water pipeline at New Germany?

It's an industrial area and the pipeline was a bulk water supply for it, so if the campaign was about disrupting the energy grid as part economic sabotage that's what we did. The idea ultimately at a strategic level was that business would put pressure on the government because of the industrial sabotage and the apartheid system not being sustainable. Ultimately that's what happened, it was business people who first started talking to the ANC.

After 1994 you reached out to the victims of the *Magoo's* Bar bombing?

Yes. But remember an innocent son of a nurse, Mlungisi Buthelezi, died and a few got injured during the Edendale rescue operation, yet no one talks about that. Why? Because he was Black? I met his family and they said we are now clear what happened and why and we support you. We are sorry we lost our son, but we are sorry you went to prison. Our child was not supposed to be there that night. The mother said she was delayed in the ward. They were very understanding.

I spoke also with the cops that survived the booby trap where Wellman died. The one guy, a Sergeant Van Der Merwe, still had the burn marks. I explained the situation.

I did not grovel for their forgiveness because I made it clear to them you can forgive if you want to, but forgiveness is something that comes from deep inside. But you can't expect me to ask for forgiveness for fighting for freedom. I was oppressed. But by the system – but understand really I'm sorry that I hurt you, an individual, in the process of fighting for my freedom. I spoke to them.

I spoke to the people affected by the *Why Not Bar* operation and some of them were okay, but one family was quite vicious. Another family contacted me and demanded money for a victim who was young. But that's coercion, blackmail, and I walked away. I said to them do whatever you want to.

I've got a lot more forgiving due to me as opposed to them forgiving me. It's I who was oppressed, subjugated, treated as a second class citizen, denied proper education, and not allowed the vote because I was seen as subhuman.

And they were the beneficiaries. But, I repeat, as a human being, I know I caused pain to other human beings and I don't feel good about it. It's not something I can be proud about. It's something I still have to live with.

Rostron says 'the *Magoo's* car bomb remains a habitually unforgiven fixation'. Why do you think that is? Why do you think this operation in particular has stuck in the minds of people compared, for example, to the Pretoria bombing in which there were more deaths and injuries? There were also deaths in the Witbank car bombing…

Well, the same people also condemn the Pretoria bombing. But in the *Why Not Bar* case, the three deaths and almost all the injured were Whites. Black civilians died in the Pretoria bombing, and in the Witbank bombing the victims were Black. Nobody even remembers the Witbank case.

Every year journalists will mention the names of the victims of *Why Not and Magoo's*, but not once have they written about Black victims.

And what about the apartheid bombing of the ANC office in London? And the parcel bomb that killed Ruth First? And the bomb that killed Marius Schoon? And the bombing that killed Peter Mafoko, a six year old boy in Gaborone, and countless others elsewhere? No one mentions those names as people. The South African government agents used car bombs also. Nobody mentions that.

Was there a pact between you and Gordon that if either of you were arrested, the other would try to release you?

No, there wasn't such a pact.

Did Welile Khumalo have such a pact with him or a pact that if either was detained the other would try to kill him?

Well, that's what he said, but, I mean, if you are taking the risk to get to Gordon in detention, why don't you rescue the comrade? Khumalo was being defeatist, fatalistic, with a 'we all have to die happily together' approach. But we could actually get something great out of rescuing Gordon.

I suppose that's why a lot of my comrades, even senior ones who I've never worked with, label me as adventurous sometimes. But which would be more adventurous: blowing yourself up in a hospital or rescuing a comrade and successfully taking him out of the country back into exile? I mean isn't that revolutionary? Spectacular? Doesn't it boost the morale of MK comrades, the ANC, the oppressed people of South Africa?

So, out of resentment and, I suppose, feelings of, I would say, jealousy or envy, they put labels on you.

If you do something that is unusual, something they haven't thought of, then they give you names. If you excel in what you do, in their minds it's because you're adventurous. Now I don't know where that crap comes from, but this is said by very senior people, very experienced, committed people.

But, as I said, I didn't lose my humanity, the truth of the matter is human beings will be human beings. We in Special Ops were not in competition with anybody else. We just went about our work and did it to the best of our ability with total commitment and discipline. If we are called adventurous because of that, so let it be!

So, I tried to release Gordon, firstly because I didn't accept his captivity. He was my Commander, the guy that recruited and trained me. Secondly, I did an assessment on whether it's possible. If I saw it was totally impossible, I would've stood down. But the moment I realised it is possible, and we had assets in the hospital who were giving us information, the issue was, if I don't make an attempt then we are actually cowards, we're not true to what we believe in.

Here there was a possibility. We even contacted Botswana and got extra equipment and resources. Why shouldn't we do it? Again, going back to how the other side sees it, they say 'who dares wins'. We are in a war, are we bereft of spectacular operations or abilities? Are we as dumb as they say, are we not capable of complex operations? Well, the truth of the matter, and it is a historical fact now, is that we were capable of complex operations, unlike our enemy. We didn't make a movie of every spectacular operation we did; that's the only issue.

But we did it, it's there forever. No one ever can take an operation away from MK and Special Operations. It's there. It's in the history books. It's what I said to my torturers: you can do whatever you want to me, you had your best people guarding my Commander but we took him out of the country safely and you can never take that away from us, even if you must hang me.

So the importance of that operation is that it conveys what MK's capable of and, remember also, I had minimal training and so did the rest of my unit, and yet we did, as a matter of course, spectacular operations.

You had previously admired US Black Power activist Jonathan Jackson's attempt to rescue George Jackson, his brother, and other activists, by attacking a court? You are supposed to have said that White South Africans will only show respect for Blacks if we show the same audacity and contempt, show them what we're capable of? Do you think that unconsciously or consciously influenced your decision to rescue Gordon?

Yes. That would've been an influence. It's also related to the Black Consciousness movement approach of accepting self-worth, knowing you're equal in ability to Whites and you're equal to any task. I was speaking recently at the anniversary of the death of MK comrades Prakash Napier and Yusuf Akhalwaya from Lenasia from the Ahmed Timol unit and I said that the statistics then for the survival of an MK comrade was 90 days from the day you start operations to death or capture. The Ahmed Timol unit lasted for years and so did the Dolphin. One thing everybody misses out in that, is that Americans make movies about *Behind enemy lines*, *Behind enemy lines 2*, and continuations of that. Everything we did was behind enemy lines.

I mean, you had a whole society mobilised against us, prepared for total onslaught, for total war. Every farmer on the border would plough his land every day so that in the morning he comes and checks if there's any footprints of us crossing. They got subsidies for diesel to do that. Their whole society was mobilised against us and yet we still entered the country with weapons and sometimes we exited the country with people undetected. And it was always behind enemy lines, something to be proud of.

Some of the mistakes we have now of the stealing and the corruption is because people have low self-esteem, so they sell themselves up short and take bribes to favour one business over another.

If you know your history and your worth, you don't need to say anything, it's just in your conduct, it's what takes you forward and proves the point. As I said, it's the feelings of low self-esteem that make some very good comrades susceptible to bribes. Why would a person bribe you? It's the same as slavery. If he bribes you he owns you. You belong to him. Ownership of one human by another was outlawed long ago. Corruption is a type of slavery also. The guy owns you now. He expects you to do certain things.

And it goes back again to the audacity shown in the rescue of Commander Gordon Webster. You need to show that audacity and capability because you want to assert your equal-ness, your ability, without diminishing anybody else.
…

Gordon introduced me to military history even before he left the country. He was interested in how Africans have fared against other people and what it means for us. We used to go to the one place in the Durban City Hall where we were allowed – the library, where they had international newspapers.

In one of the newspapers there was a review of Julie Frederikse's book *A Different Kind of War,* about Zimbabwe. So whenever there was a raid against ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) or ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary

Army) in Mozambique or Zambia, the cartoonists of the racist Rhodesians would always make caricatures of Black people and the so-called terrorists running away helter-skelter, wide-eyed, with exaggerated facial features and torn boots and being hit by the colonial forces from the air.

It was the stereotype that Black people will run away all the time in great panic from the superior human beings who managed machines and weaponry with dexterity and efficiency. So, of course, that laid a foundation, parts of the resentment, in me, that this is how they see us and therefore we should never act like how they see us.

I think the Soledad brothers, that review of Julie Frederikse's book, and reading a lot of newspapers different from South African papers, all contributed to the possibility of success in our operations and the decision on the Edendale rescue of Gordon.

You and Gordon seemed to have had an usually close relationship; you were not just comrades or friends, you were brothers almost. That true? What was it that drew you to each other?

Firstly, Gordon came from a rural area and in my early years I lived in a rural area in Harding. Gordon was a boxer. I was a boxer also. Gordon liked reggae music and I liked reggae music. So, there was some kind of affinity which allowed us to discuss things.

But above that I found it just very easy to speak to him. It was just sort of natural, you could say instinctive. We were coming from sort of macho societies where men don't talk about feelings or what's worrying them. Gordon and I would speak about things that were worrying us, even though we're both generally introverts and quiet, reticent in expressing how we're feeling. We also could disagree on issues without any acrimony.

But I think even more important, there was the friendship, and later comradeship was built on that. I didn't need to know what Gordon was doing, I just knew that it would be in the best interests of all of us. So, we didn't have to second guess each other on issues.

Even though Gordon, I think, was a year or so younger than me, he knew more than me on many subjects and he recruited and trained me, I deferred to him, and I listened to him and he was the Commander.

People would find that funny because usually I'm the leader in most situations and go forward and show other people, but I was happy to follow Gordon and his

instructions to the tee. He also made it clear to me without any equivocation the serious business we were about to embark on.

He did not fool me. There was no illusion. There was no wrong expectations or unreasonable pressure. We knew that we were going to die and were happy to make the sacrifice. There were just so many commonalities, and an easy way of expressing ourselves to each other. We spent a lot of time speaking to each other, mostly at college. That's how it was.

You also have some Irish ancestry on both sides?

Yes.

You both decided to become teachers? You became friends on the first day at Bechet College?

Yes.

You say you're introverted. Though that doesn't come across in this interview or your public persona. But, of course, it doesn't mean you're not. Maybe in some senses at least you and Gordon have complementary personalities? From what comes across in my reading, he seems to be quiet, reserved, subdued and you have a more overt, stronger presence?

Yes.

Maybe you got along so well partly because of your complementary personalities? It seems that together you made up some sort of whole? Trevor, Rodney's brother, is quoted as saying, 'Robert and Gordon were one, you couldn't separate them.'

There's a possibility we might never have met and gone our separate ways forever, and perhaps not joined MK and just kept our heads down and been normal people. But by coming together and being able to discuss issues and being able to realise that actually apartheid is bullshit and we shouldn't tolerate this madness, we were able to act together. Of course not in so many words, but it's the conclusion we came to.

How can we co-exist with this madness and do nothing about it? If we do nothing, wouldn't that madness make us mad also? We were 19 when we came to that conclusion.

Also the issue of identity. Where do mixed race people fit in? How do they fit in? Mixed race people are all shades of light from white to dark black, if I can put it

that way. And within them there is prejudice about complexion, so where do you fit in? And then you also feel prejudice from other races, if I can use the term race. So, you never know whether you are White enough or Black enough.

You only realise later in life, well actually, I am who I am and to hell with anybody else who sees me through racial lens. And that's when you really find yourself. I think in MK that's what we found, that it was irrelevant what colour we were. Our Commander was Indian in South African terminology. Before that it was a White guy (Slovo) and then an African (Montso Mokgabudi, MK name Obadi). The people who were my Commanders were so-called Africans. Gordon and I are of mixed race.

And all of that was okay, it never became an issue – and suddenly now we are part of a movement that is non-racial, that accepts you completely, that you entrust your lives with. Your very existence is intertwined with that trust and working together. It never became an issue for us at any stage anywhere. So, we were partners in a non-racial movement and a special MK unit designed to end apartheid. There can be nothing more solidifying or consolidating or that can give you more certainty in your own self about who you are than that kind of set up. It's Gordon that took me really in that direction. Before Gordon came back I was involved at a peripheral level with another unit.

But it's really the discussions with Gordon and asking in our own very simplistic late teenage years way, ourselves questioning the circumstances and conditions we found ourselves in, that allowed us to come to the point where we embraced non-racialism, and we became sure of ourselves and the role that we could play, and that we didn't need anybody else's endorsement to make us what we are.

That's on an emotional, spiritual and mental level, and when you reach that stage you've actually crossed a major milestone in life – which other people are still battling with even now in post-apartheid South Africa.

The make-up and the way we functioned at Special Ops was an example of Black excellence, of ANC excellence, that under the worst conditions you can forge such strong bonds amongst people of different backgrounds. With people, whom until you meet them, are strangers, and the only thing that's really linking you is your commitment to establish a new future for the country. But it's Gordon who prepared me to seamlessly move into that environment. Gordon's a great guy and he's been unfairly not taken into account when the dividends of the peace, if I can say it like that, were distributed. We got the short end of the stick.

After Gordon was rescued, Victor, his brother, is quoted as saying in Rostron's book: 'Gordon and Robert grew closer than brothers…while Gordon was injured and needed looking after, Robert tended to him like

a child, he had to do everything for Gordon even wipe his bum. Robert would have given his life for him. Gordon would have given his life for Robert too. They really loved each other.' Trevor, Gordon's other brother, goes on to say that 'Gordon said there isn't a man in the world who can do what Robert did for me, more than a friend. I was a baby and Robert was wiping my backside. No man could do that for another man.' These are most remarkable tributes to your comradeship, your deep friendship.

It's true.

Somewhere it's said: 'Gordon felt now on the other side he owed Robert his life, I was overwhelmed, tormented he says by his capture. I was obsessed by the need to get him out.' I was struck that Anne, pregnant as she was, decided to come back into the country to help rescue you. That too is remarkable. And, of course, Gordon gets captured just after entering the country to rescue you.

Yes. I don't know all the details of how he got recaptured and who was with him.

As with all of us, Gordon also had his contradictions. You have referred to this in other interviews, for example, that he could be cautious and yet also turn up at your place with a limpet wrapped in newspaper or he would suddenly turn up and you'd zoom into an operation. Also, while there were understandable constraints, he kept arms in a cupboard in the place he was staying in in Dambuza.

As I've said, for me Gordon was one of the greatest things to happen to me - some of the stuff that he taught me, I'm still using today to survive. In a time where there are constant attacks on anti-corruption fighters and people are getting knocked off because they fight against corruption, it's the stuff Gordon taught me that makes me survive still today.

In a moment of weakness, I might have criticised him about some of these issues. But for me, Gordon still in terms of influence and material impact on me, stands out above the others.

And, whatever I said, the main point is that when we moved in operations, and so many at that, they went as smooth as grease lightning. The fact that we had to be daring and audacious and sometimes had a devil-may-care approach are all in the nature of the struggle. I mean, the struggle is made up of human beings who have their own personalities that manifest themselves in the way we do operations.

Gordon was outstanding. Sometimes he took risks. Sometimes we had no other options. You can't knock on someone's door and say can you please keep this stuff for me? There were few and far between who would help us. Sometimes people take these things out of context.

The ANC was banned and townships were ridden with police informants – and now in post 1994 we have become more aware of the extent to which we were infiltrated. Despite the sophistication of the operations that they ran against us, we were still able to bring weaponry all the way through three countries into South Africa and do an operation. Through all the dangers all the way, where the weapons come crossing crocodile-infested rivers, through different jurisdictions and still got here – that on its own is a miracle.

We did it multiple times which showed we were getting our infrastructure, our supply lines moving better than ever before. One has to be fair and say it's good that we did not descend into a conflagration and that there were negotiations when they happened. One cannot wish for us to have been more successful - because it's a kind of dichotomy, once we decided to talk peace, we talked ourselves out of existence.

We went towards disbandment in December 1993, which was a natural consequence of our negotiations and our struggle that there would be a settlement and peace one day and MK would have to disappear and go into the mainstream. The fact was that we were building up momentum until the negotiations.

The effective last month of the struggle wasn't after the ceasefire in 1990; it was in September and October 1989, after the Rivonia Trialists came out. I think there were only one or two operations after that year. There was some (apartheid) election taking place then. And the operations carried on for its thirty days and then stopped. And that's the discipline in anticipation of the unbanning.

Until then every day there was an MK operation.

About the other comrades in your unit, Nazeem Cassiem didn't turn up twice, including for the Edendale rescue operation. Why? Did he just lose his nerve? Or was it something else?

I think that was it. We took him in because he came from political nobility, if I can call it that. His uncle, Achmat Cassiem, became the head of Qibla and was imprisoned on Robben Island. And Nazeem knew the history of the different political organisations better than any of us. He could sing the freedom songs better than any of us, he could *toyi-toyi* better than any of us. We were youngsters, 19 and 20.

I knew Nazeem for about 3 or 4 years before I recruited him. He could explain to me in detail, for example, the importance of the Iranian revolution, which had just happened. And also explain its importance to the wider role of the working class in the Islamic countries; he was very articulate, and I liked him. I assumed, perhaps wrongly, that he would have the necessary commitment and bravery to translate his knowledge into armed action.

In other movements they've said they would've killed him on the first day that he let us down. But those are other movements. I don't think I could have brought myself to do that. While we were supposed to be vicious terrorists and horrible people, I never lost my humanity and perhaps that was a weakness in me, and perhaps sometimes you have to be a bit of the beast to defeat a beast. I don't know…

Nazeem boasted to Gaster Sharpley that he was in MK and he comes to you to say he wants to join, to your surprise. How did you respond?

You can leave it lingering and continue creating a danger or you recruit and pull him in and that's what we did. So, he effectively became part of the unit because I had to decide then and there what to do because he wanted his training and if we allowed the whispers, it would've been a problem. So, we had to tie him into secrecy, into the discipline of MK and then get him trained and activated.

Did he take part in any of your operations?

No, he wasn't trained, he was one of the first among a few hundred to be detained in our township during the state of emergency.

You relied a lot on Matthew Lecordier. He later became a state witness. What did you make of that?

The first issue is that the ANC and Special Ops had never prepared us for capture and interrogation. So, I also was unable to prepare others for it. That mistake is on me and it's on the ANC leadership. Other resistance movements, they actually start the training from when you're in prison. So you are captured now, what do you do, and then they work backwards to when you are deployed. We didn't have that training. We didn't know what to expect. We didn't anticipate the extent of the brutality that would be visited on us. Matthew was threatened, the life of his son was threatened, and he wanted to see his son one more time. That's his issue.

So, for me, there's a human side to it. We can come with our political justifications or denunciations, but at the end of the day its human beings in struggle for a

better South Africa. We therefore cannot become ourselves inhuman, to the extent that we let any sense of vindictiveness or bitterness get the better of us. That is why Matthew testified, it's fine.

I can say quite clearly nobody under my command on my watch died. I brought everybody home. Even those who became state witnesses, I took no one with me to Death Row, I went alone.

All the others involved had much shorter sentences than they would've had. I mean I was offered to turn – they had really sophisticated ways – but my position was, once I had made up my mind from the beginning that, ja, I was going to jail, I'm going to hang, it was kind of a peaceful place to be in. Because every time the issue of turning was raised, I could say, well, look, guys don't get overworked, I was prepared to die for the struggle. By being resigned to die it actually helped me.

People were really pressured, for example, hallucinogens were given to Greta's sister, Jeanette. She started seeing all sorts of things. I'm not aware of it being put in food, but people being injected. I haven't had a chance to talk to her about whether she was injected or had medical treatment since.

Is it true that you got a message while in prison whether you wanted Matthew bumped off for becoming a state witness and you said no?

Yes. That was after I was sentenced.

About Alan Pearce, another comrade in your unit, you want to say anything?

Alan was brave, he preferred to be an activist; we didn't have enough time to develop him for more action. He was involved in two or three. He wasn't intellectual, Wentworth is a poor area but through our politicisation, he lifted himself up to see the bigger picture. He was, from what I hear, one of the most loved people on Robben Island in the way he operated. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time together to develop his involvement in the military more. But for me, certainly, he was an asset to the unit.

There's a reference to Whitey and Virgil, but no surnames. Were they in your unit?

They never got involved with us. I didn't recruit them. They were in a pool of activists who were brave, intelligent, funny, knowledgeable.

And Marson Sharpley?

Marsden is Gaster's brother. Marsden was also at college with us. He was arrested many times and tortured. We didn't recruit him into Special Ops because his detentions affected him very badly, and also reinforced our view that we don't want to consider non-violent means. To make matters worse, one of the Security Branch cops dated Marsden's daughter.

You had to assist Vincent James whom you had to get out of the country. Why?

Vincent James was in one of the hand grenade units in the Western Cape. They dealt with collaborators and also had a propaganda value. Vincent had a high profile and was involved on the periphery with 'The Doctor's Unit', but then he was made to change his high profile and was trained in the use of hand grenades. He had to set up a unit with Kevin Curtis and Marcelle Andrews and they carried out a number of operations in Durban. In fact, we had now started growing the network – that's what happened.

I asked Gordon if we could take Vincent out of the country because he had also been connected to the guys in an explosion. In fact, one of the guys who was injured ran to Vincent's house. Vincent was actually wanted at that stage.

Kevin was in the Hand Grenade Unit with Vincent James, not in our unit. I recruited Vincent and he recruited the others so I never knew Kevin operationally.

Kevin completed his matric and a degree on Robben Island.

Why did Gordon, your father and Welile Khumalo not appear in the TRC hearings with you?

My father and Gordon didn't apply on principle.

Welile Khumalo became a state witness and then an IFP leader but I don't know where he is now.

Bheki Ngubane was killed when trying to escape with Gordon when they tried to run away from being arrested by the police. So, you did lose a life in your and Gordon's units? Was that the only life lost?

Yes.

As much as you did so many good operations, some within our ranks raise the issue about whether you, strictly speaking, fell within the

Special Ops unit. That your activities blurred the distinction between Special Ops operations and that of other MK units. Your views?

Well, that's pathetic and disingenuous because if it was routine stuff that others were doing, why weren't they doing it? You cannot have some criticism against an operation because it doesn't fall within somebody else's narrow definition of it. Operations were operations. They were meant to achieve the same aim. We selected targets in the industrial sphere and particularly the energy sphere because it would disrupt the economy. That was the aim of Special Ops. So, why did we not belong there?

If one understands war and warfare, it's about draining the resources of the enemy so that they can have no other option but to talk to you. So, you slow down the economy; that's why other countries used sanctions. We didn't have the monetary or military power to bring it to a head quicker, but the incremental and cumulative effect of all these operations got there.

Rocky Williams says Special Ops operations take many months and planning and, therefore, don't give momentum to the struggle. Let's accept that some spectacular targets take time to plan, so why not in the meantime carry out a less difficult operation?

We never thought that we'd ever march into Pretoria on the backs of T34's (Soviet tanks) but we knew that the effect of our operations was ultimately to give people hope; it was armed propaganda, economic sabotage and would one day lead to negotiations.

That was one of the first astonishing things when I joined Special Ops that was put up right in front of me: that we would never win militarily, but it's the cumulative effects of nibbling away at the apartheid pillar that would lead to negotiations.

So, given what you've just said, don't you think these criticisms of your units' operations are actually reverse compliments? That you managed to do both Special Ops operations and ordinary MK operations? And maybe the question should be why were the other MK units not more active with ordinary operations and not that you also carried out such operations?

That is indeed the case, and, as I explained, we experienced the response of the people to MK activities that day when we were marooned in Lamontville; that was empirical evidence. New Germany in the Pinetown area is also right next to Claremont.

The formation of Special Ops relates to the visit the ANC leadership made to Vietnam where they picked up that if the people were not made ready to accept your armed struggle you will not be able to be successful. So, you have to work with the people, identify their problems and be in close proximity to them.

Are you referring to the *Green Book* (Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee, August 1979, South African History Online)….?

Yes. So that was the new thrust. If you remember, between '65 and '75 it was dead inside South Africa except for a few small rumblings, but after '79 - and whether it's a coincidence or not that this was after Special Ops was formed - suddenly the ANC and MK has a much bigger, spectacular presence in South Africa.

So, it's learning from other theatres of struggle. SWAPO, for example, had an operation every day. But some of their operations were a telephone pole. They would put a block of TNT on a telephone or telegraph or electric pole in the North, and although it seems like a really simple operation and not thought out, it would cause the apartheid forces to be deployed there. Then they would have secondary operations ambushing the apartheid army that came to those areas. These come-hither operations were important for us also, as I said.

It seems that people get driven to armed struggles because they feel oppressed, materially deprived, dehumanised and for moral, religious, ideological, intellectual and other reasons. Several of these and other factors maybe combine in different ways in different people. Do you think that, as minimal as it might be, that some sense of an adventure, of action, understandably, also drives people to the armed struggles?

Well, I lived in Durban near the see. If I really wanted adrenalin, if I was an adrenalin junkie, I'd take up surfing among the sharks, for example. I wouldn't have to engage in revolutionary struggle.

Yes, of course. The question wasn't meant to suggest that that would be the main reason, only that it could be a very minor, maybe subconscious, understandable, reason, among many others, in what impels some – certainly not all - people to take up armed struggle. Some of the comrades interviewed for this project did, in fact, suggest this. Anyway, you're certainly a man of action and have been quoted saying that when you joined MK: ` I had found my vocation….There was satisfaction – at last, I'm here, like a rich man when he gets his first million…Joining MK, knowing I'll really be part of the struggle against the horrible system of apartheid, that for me was my first million. I felt

very comfortable, very relaxed in what I was doing. I can remember only once being nervous.' Elsewhere you say: 'This is what I had been waiting for. I felt no nerves, no butterflies. I was well prepared and this kind of thing did not worry me. I was now able to do what I was good at. This was made for me. I was born for it". It seemed almost as if you feel you were predestined to become a guerrilla. You even say you were born for it.

Look, in every struggle there are people who do different things they are good at. So you would have musicians and dancers with struggle songs who in the ANC formed the *Amandla* group. There were others who were good writers and they wrote books – Mzala. Others were good at organising trade unions. Others were good at administration, and others at finances. So every society and every struggle has people who have their specialities.

And this is from time immemorial. So, the guy who made the spears in pre-historic times was somebody who was not a good soldier but he understood fire and metal. So, each one has a role to play in areas they are good at.

All countries have standing armies and within them they have people who are specialists in missiles, or its air force or its infantry or navy or whatever.
Even a simple thing like some people see further than other people physically, their eyesight is better so they are more apt at spotting danger or hunting or other things. So, I think also nature gives us abilities, and given the opportunity to develop them, we suddenly find that we're actually really better than we thought we were at it. It's just a normal thing.

But it also worked against us in post-apartheid South Africa because everyone puts you in the category of a security person. Yet I have done my degree in international relations. I regard myself an expert in that and on what gave rise to the Second World War because one of my subjects was history and another was international politics. I'm better than a lot of people who claim to be experts in military history.

But because you were exceptional within MK you get punished for being in the military – which is the opposite of what happens in western countries. If you're good in the military you get your medals and your orders and you are put in a position of authority because you've proved yourself. Whereas in South Africa post '94, the more effective you were in the military, when it really mattered, you get punished for it.

Why do you think that the ANC shrank away from Gordon and you? If I'm correct, the ANC's second submission to the TRC seemed somewhat ambivalent in its response to the *Magoo's* operation?

Because the ANC is a broad church and there are a lot of botch-ups in it, you get these contradictions. There are human beings who pass judgment out of ignorance. There was nothing wrong with the *Why Not* operation. It was the right thing at the right place at the right time, and had the right effect. And you can go and ask the Security Branch and the National Intelligence Services of that time, they were wondering how come we knew that the cops and soldiers were in the place.

People can cover up and give all sorts of stories. The truth of the matter is that a lot of people are in a position to comment. It was convenient because no one bothered to ask me what had happened. It was maybe to some extent our unit's own fault because we were so disciplined in our secrecy, but no leader came to me and asked what happened – ever!

While I was on Death Row, Mandela visited me twice. When I was in prison before my release, Chris Hani, Walter Sisulu, Mathews Phosa, Ronnie Kasrils, Siphiwe Nyanda and others came to visit me. When I was released from prison Walter Sisulu, Jeff Radebe, Sbu Ndebele, Mewa Rambgobin and other comrades received me at the prison gates. So for me, if you have Mandela, Sisulu, Radebe and Rambgobin embracing you, I don't care what anybody else says.

And you'll remember that in 1992, Mandela's precondition for the resumption of talks was 'release McBride,' which irritated a lot of comrades. But Mandela embraced me. I don't need anybody else's comment. Mandela is the founder of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Nobel Peace Prize winner, first President of the democratic South Africa.

The Ahmed Kathrada Foundation gave me an award for courage and integrity. I have been asked over and over again to speak at branches and other functions. In 1994 I was the third highest person on the ANC list for Gauteng province, higher than Tokyo Sexwale in a province which is not mine.

I refer to these criticisms, when I talk to Rashid, as 'Special Ops envy'. That's really what it is. I don't begrudge anybody else who was in the struggle. The fact that some people who were in the trenches with us made mistakes and some got caught before they did anything doesn't matter – because they were there, in the trenches, and their numbers mattered.

When they went to court, they had the opportunity to continue the struggle propaganda from the stand. I think some comrades in the ANC got us wrong. They didn't want to ask us what really happened and they were also played by the other side. It's understandable, but they are wrong, and they have no factual basis on which they base their opinions.

What do you make of the fact that you were released in some sort of deal that also meant that (White supremacist) Barend Strydom was released?

Well, it wasn't a deal. It had nothing to do with the ANC. That question must be directed at De Klerk, not at me and the ANC. The ANC just wanted its people released. The ANC was not in power.

Anyway I must respond to this. I think it's perverse and ridiculous to equate a freedom fighter for democracy with somebody like Strydom. So, people who have that idea, I think, need to go for psychological counselling.

So how exactly did you, Greta and Derrick get arrested on your way to Botswana? How were you traced to your uncle's place in Nigel?

What we know is that it was after comrades were arrested during the state of emergency that the police came to my house looking for me. I think one of them spoke about me. Maybe my name came up through Nazeem because he was a bit loose-mouthed?

The way they really caught us, is that they put a tap on the phone line of Greta's brother. Usually we were disciplined. Phoning short calls home from call boxes and then moving away to different parts of the then Transvaal. But on that day, we were supposed to leave, so Greta phoned from the house where we were at before we were to leave.

For some reason the people persuaded us to stay behind because we looked tired and it was our last day in South Africa. So we stayed. You know, after a while you get tired, you're exhausted. But the call was traced, and at about two o'clock in the morning, according to the cops afterwards, they had the house under observation, and at five o'clock they pounced.

You have to understand how their operations work, that's why I said that the fact that we were able to carry out operations in spite of the forces against us was a miracle. For example, we had a number of people in college who were in the first year for three years, which was not allowed. We were just curious about them and in 1993 we found out at least one of them worked for NIS (National Intelligence Service).

Mo (Shaik, ANC political underground operative) and them were doing joint operations with them in preparation for the integration of the security forces and he was spotted with the apartheid security guys. So, the police would have profiled you from the beginning if you played a leadership role in student politics.

Gordon and I were also aware that one of the people in our class was working for the National Intelligence Services.

Also, when Gordon left the country his mother reported him missing. When he went to Botswana he was recorded in the refugee camp. There were spies in the camps and in Botswana an agent would send photos and other details of the refugees back to South Africa.

You spent several weeks in Johannesburg, before you made the decision to leave properly. Both Greta and you were discussing whether it was the right thing to do and when you'd finally decided to leave with Derrick, your father decided to go and see his brother in Nigel to say goodbye. The day before you were going to leave, your car got broken into so you were also delayed because of that? If it hadn't been for these, understandable, human things that happened, presumably you'd have gone into exile and avoided your arrests and what came later?

Yes, we would've been gone then with a different history.

Wasn't your Mum's phone tapped?

It was Greta's brother's line, Eric Apelgren's, that gave us away.

Did you ask a young friend to clear the explosives - the 'paw paws,' you said – at your place but he didn't do that and the police found them when they raided it?

Yes, I can't remember the details now.

During your detention, were you actually shown about 5000 photographs of comrades who'd gone into exile?

Robert McBride in a police lineup, Bryan Rostron, Robert McBride…Tafelberg

Probably there were more.

Who from Special Ops was there?

Everybody was there. Rashid, (Ernest) Pule, Victor (Joannes Mnisi), Chris (Lester Dumakude), Hassen (Ebrahim, MK operative in Botswana, not in Special Ops). The internationalists.

Of the comrades you interacted with in Special Ops who are two or three who stand out for you and why?

Well, it would be Oupa, Chris and Victor, and of course Rashid. Also Hassen– if, for example, I had to do an unscheduled visit I would touch base with Hassen because I knew where he used to move around, and he would check whether I've got my contact and I would say no and then he'd tell the people that we're around. We had a pre-arranged place where we would meet. So the three I worked the most with were Chris, Pule and Victor.

They were just hard-working, committed; a lot of times they would take us across if we had to cross on foot, but they would always joke to take away the tension. They were fulfilling so many roles as Commanders, but also as our protectors. They were just very cool and hardworking.

I mean, these people worked and they were strong, they were very wiry, they were super fit. I remember the first day we had to go through, we had to stop the car in the bush and walk through a long pathway to reach a hut. There were three bags of land mines there. They were supposed to show me how they work. I volunteered to help with the bag, but it was really heavy. Chris picked it up like it was a matchstick. I couldn't understand how such a wiry guy could be so strong.

There was never any difference of opinion on any issue between us. And they explained things very properly.

Do you want to say anything about Rashid in particular?

Rashid was very firm and stern. I don't remember him smiling once. Now he laughs easily, but, remember, he was only about 31 then and he had such a big burden on his shoulders. Which 31 year old could do what he did then? He was brilliant! He would be very careful and thorough in discussing the details of an operation. You had to explain it from A to Z and be questioned by him; he would take you through things minute by minute. And he'd say what if this happens, then what? But he never sent us in not knowing what we were going to do or having doubts about us.

And the most important thing is that he kept the unit together through the TRC process when no other unit stuck together like that. He looked after his people. He took responsibility, which none of the other Commanders did to the same extent.

What was Garnet Gordon's role in Botswana play?

He was mainly doing fundraising in Gaborone for the ANC. He died of a heart attack in an aeroplane after '94.

You raised the issue of identity earlier. Many progressive people were very uncomfortable with the racial classifications we had under apartheid and preferred to see ourselves primarily as 'Black' and 'South African'. But we can't run away from these identities or the way in which they shaped our political consciousness. To what extent do you think your 'Coloured identity', so to speak, even if you wanted to shrug that off, shaped your political awakening and your later advanced political identity?

I prefer to think that my decision to become involved in the struggle was because of how mad and immoral the apartheid system was, and I couldn't co-exist with it – and it was really maddening. It pushed me through a lot of turmoil not doing something about it for a number of years. The environment from which you come has to play a role; the phenomenon of gangs is to a large extent in South Africa a Coloured issue, and there is a machismo in the culture.

As I said, one of the biggest sins is to have to have run away from the gangsters. So, there's this funny sub-culture within that society which forces a kind of pecking order where gangsters knew they must leave me alone - because when I realised that bullies can also bleed, it was an epiphany for me. Sometimes I'd get the shit kicked out of me, but the gangsters that attacked me would also be bleeding. Perhaps that environment toughened me up but I wasn't born tough, I was a gentle guy.

I would look after kids, I had a natural protective spirit in me. But the idea that bullies can also bleed is what made me realise that apartheid can also bleed and hence it needs to. I found out, in a very organic way, that the same guy or group that are coming to beat me up, they'd do it once, but when I hit back they won't come back because there's a cost to bear for assaulting me.

In the end, they would say I'm mad, like a lot of people who don't get their way with me now say that one's a loose cannon because they realise I cannot be bullied. I will not be made to feel small or inferior. But that comes from my experience. So it must've played a role somewhere. It's also difficult to talk about one's self because you want to remember yourself in a particular way and that can be like a bit dishonest and I try to avoid being dishonest in anything I do.

Can you say a bit about your relationship with Greta?

She was a very solid comrade and very cool during an operation, but I was too immature on an emotional and sentimental level to actually give her more of what a man-woman relationship needs. I might have been mature for the struggle but I didn't cater as well as I should have in my relationship with her and I didn't

understand the peculiarities of the genders. There was probably some emotional neglect from my side.

But Greta was a solid comrade. She is also one of those who is proud, who would prefer to die than sell-out. She was quite willing to sacrifice very easily, I'm not sure why, but her view was that if we die then we die doing a good deed. I'm not sure if it was because she was quite a religious person also.

But she was a tower of strength during the struggle for me and somehow, because she was older than me, she kind of understood me a bit better than I understood myself. She didn't complain about the operations and the time she had to take away from work and the problems of being away from home and moving around.

For example, after we took Gordon out, we had to wander around Botswana for two weeks because the security attacked one of the places that Garnet Gordon - we called him Allan Williams – was running. There was a feeling they were looking for us and someone must've spotted us. Through all of that she was like really cool. We used to call her the 'stone' because she just put a mask on.

You married Paula Leyden while you were in prison. Anything you want to say about her?

For me, Paula was one of the most dynamic people I've ever come across, one of the most loving people. She gave everything. She also didn't care a damn, and she had complete contempt for the apartheid system. She was one of those who would regularly tell me don't give up hope, this thing will not last, you're inside here, but we know what's going on outside.

She's actually the first one that came to tell me that there was some deal being attempted for an exchange of prisoners between those of us on Death Row and those apartheid spies on Death Row in Zimbabwe for spying - because she was going out of the country and linking up with Aunty Phyllis Naidoo and other people in Lusaka. She was one of those facilitating those talks behind the scenes. She's an outstanding human being. There's nothing I can say against her.

You have three children together?

Yes. Generally, I don't speak about my kids because they must be their own people.

After 1994, how many of the comrades in your units were given state jobs?

Well Gaster, who was one of my recruits, eventually got a doctorate and now heads the Public Works Department in KZN. He's a very good administrator, very intelligent, still humble, very close to the people.

Many of the guys were not well educated, and this was held against us as we didn't have qualifications. So then, we studied. My last degree was an Honours in Police Science in 2006. One thing I make sure is that no one must be able to point a finger at me and say I did not assert myself to get qualified.

Robert McBride and Rashid at the TRC, Independent Mediia

Apart from what you've already said, is there anything else you want to say about the ANC's attitude to MK, not Special Ops specifically, since 1994?

I think we moved too slowly on it. I think non-MK comrades have got an attitude against MK people and this is also helped along by the narrative of our enemies, which mainly runs along the lines that we were quite useless and it was the mass struggle and international struggle and diplomacy that brought about the end of apartheid.

It's also a factionist approach and it wrongly sees the diplomatic efforts of the ANC, in particular driven by Tambo, as separate from other aspects of the struggle. They forget that Special Ops was in the office of Tambo, and that while Tambo was on the diplomatic offensive and isolating apartheid and moving around all over the world, at the same time he was supporting operations carried out by Special Ops.

The ANC then was a secretive organisation. Many people in exile had to depend on certain figureheads for survival for the next meal. That resulted in factions that have developed over time. So, there is an attitude towards MK people in general that you're on your own. You guys in fact were just making a noise and you were quite useless so don't trouble us now, we're the clever ones, we studied, and you're just problematic.

And then some of the leadership also of the MK have brought youngsters in, pretending they are veterans – and this removed MK's credibility. And not everybody in MK was committed to prosecuting the struggle. Some were involved in wrong things.

MK veterans, in my view, are too involved in politics whereas they should be looking to the welfare of MK comrades. You can't have an MKMVA (MK Military Veterans' Association) as a league of the ANC because it's not supposed to grow, it should be dying off as time passes. So, I think we have also done things that

have made people lose respect for us. But ultimately, the attitude to us in the ANC is borne out of low self-esteem, that Black people could not persecute an armed struggle, which has been proven over and over again to be untrue.

I think there's still time enough to improve it. And most of the time people think that being concerned for MK veterans is to give out caps, T-shirts, bags and little mementoes when really it's about the welfare of the comrades.

And I also think that we cheapened some of our awards. It's not everybody that can get them and not everybody can have a street named after him or her. Some comrades were allocated street names because they were connected to the people who made the decisions. I think Rashid should get an award from the President, and I'd like to collaborate with you in doing that.

Where do you think South Africa is today and, briefly, why?

Well, we've allowed small mistakes to go by and they have snowballed and become big mistakes and they started affecting people's lives and the country negatively, and by then we were unable to hold it back. The dam wall had broken on corruption and discipline and the way we applied discipline inconsistently within the organisation.

We allowed factions with senior comrades becoming part of them. There is a kind of silence at the highest levels. People don't talk up. They will have a lot to say when the leader is removed about his leadership style but they didn't speak up when he was there.

You see how the injustices manifest themselves in parliamentary committees. I myself know how the police committee dealt with me in a disgusting way on the basis of a pure fabrication and lie. People did it because there is a kind of misdirected view that anything that appears to look like it's criticising one of the comrades, is against all of us - which is bullshit!

If somebody's a thief, he's a thief, if he's corrupt, he's corrupt. It is something which I learnt in Special Ops is – it's people's money, you can't just use it how you want to. How do you defend stealing? Corruption? Defeating the ends of justice? Dismantling the criminal justice system? How do you defend attacking the institutions of democracy? You can't defend it. It's pure criminality. We can call it nice words like 'state capture' – but it's just thievery. That's my approach on it.

So, we have to change the way we work and we have to speak up, and it might initially be that we become unpopular when we talk the truth, but we have to keep doing so, and eventually more people will speak the truth. It's painful and as one of my colleagues at work said, integrity is very costly, but I don't know

anything else except to act with integrity. There isn't another formula that I have. I can't function in an unjust, unequal environment which lacks integrity. I can't function and I don't want to. I can never be reconciled with corruption and people who are corrupt. It's as simple as that.

Corruption is our biggest threat. It's the same as apartheid, in that a few people benefit at the expense of the majority. That's just a fact.

I've already talked about the analogy of slavery. If you take a bribe, the briber owns you. You as the bribed are agreeing to slavery. For millions of years, people have fought against it. The natural instinct of a human being is to remove the shackles. For me, there's still hope as long as we remain an open society and we are speaking about the ills.

It starts with a little bit of discussion. If you remember, in the '70's there was no groundswell of opposition to apartheid. There were small groups here and there. It's the same thing now – we won't have a big groundswell of support or a general offensive very early. It's going to be difficult for a while before it gets better.

Do you think the ANC is recoverable?

Not in the present form of how we are. But we have to. Previously the ANC spoke about careerists. There's a question they asked when the meeting to form the MK National Council (MK members who rejected the behaviour of the MKMVA) was held. So we're busy criticising MKMVA for their particular behaviour, but now I'm asking all of you here in the hall, what is the epitome of a good comrade? Tell me. No one answered. Everyone avoided it.

So, you have to have qualities which say the person must be A, B, C, D, E, F. No one wanted to answer that because a lot of people who were on the Council are guilty of doing the same things they accuse the MKMVA of.

If you knew when you were in MK what South Africa and our movement would turn out to be now, would you still have done what you did then?

I don't think it could be any different. I don't think I'd have chosen a different path. Apartheid was wrong, it was a crime against humanity and I couldn't coexist with it. That is my personal feeling, and it was better that I belonged to ANC, to MK, and I was part of an organised struggle, and that I had Commanders over me to channel that energy and belief in a positive way.

I think maybe thousands of others who didn't join the ANC regret this. There are all these wannabes now who weren't there. It was not romantic, it was hard, but I never doubted the correctness of struggle, not even when I was being throttled by

the security police. For me, I never doubted the struggle once. I cannot in clear conscience say I would've had it any different.