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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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The focus of this project is on MK's Special Operations Unit, but as part of MK obviously and the role of the armed struggle in the national liberation struggle. Maybe we should start with the role of the armed struggle and MK in particular in the liberation struggle as a whole?

It will assist to utilise phases of the armed struggle, which I break down as the first phase being 1961-65; the 2nd phase 1965-69; the 3rd phase 1970-75; the 4th phase 1976-1979; and the 5th phase 1980-90. Special Operations has to be located in phase five.

But before I go on, let me say that I think this is an extremely important project and I'll assist in any way I can. A lot has been written about MK and books are coming out all the time, but there's nothing on Special Ops, and that is a subject that must be treated specifically even if as part of MK in the context of the struggle overall. I also bear in mind that JS (Joe Slovo) tasked Rashid with recording what Special Ops did...

Special Ops got going before Rashid came in. You'll also have to check on that...

But you have to look at the overall armed struggle, as you yourself say, to understand where Special Ops comes in; you have to look at the particular phases in the armed struggle. You might want to look at it in terms of the dates I just mentioned.

Joe Slovo developed Special Ops. He approached OR (Oliver Tambo). Slovo leaves London in late '76, early '77. He goes to Lusaka and then shortly thereafter to Maputo. Ruth First (married to Slovo) is teaching there at the Eduardo Mondlane University. He's assigned by Tambo to work with Joe Modise, and they recruit for MK from the post '76 influx using some of the so-called *Ngwenya* – old salts or veterans from the 1960s. The two Joes were responsible for the Military operations. Let me reveal that there was tension

between the Military and the Political work which was under John Motshabi, whose MK name was John Pule, and his deputy Mac Maharaj – since the Political and Military were not working in harmony. Each was doing their own thing. Working in silos.

And so after '79, the ANC leaders visit to Vietnam, there's a restructuring that takes place of the ANC's Revolutionary Council (RC) responsible for internal struggle. In 1980 I'm transferred from Angola to Maputo to work in the newly created Senior Organ there, which brings together all the elements of the struggle, Political, Military, Ordnance, Communication and Underground work as a result of the visit to Vietnam.

And, here, I'm going to be frank with you. It's getting into the subjective. But we have to speak about these things. Within struggles too what impels certain go-getters, real movers and shakers – the JS's, the Macs – these are very typical – to get things going is an entrepreneurial type motivation. And here I'm not criticising others – I probably exhibited the same behaviour when I'm Head of Military Intelligence from 1983. Rashid too when he's Head of Ordnance. This, well, entrepreneurial energy motivates and drives certain individuals who feel they've got more to offer and are more than keen to express themselves. And I would say that knowing the characters – JS and others, but JS particularly – as I worked very closely with him – he's got that incredible drive and talent and that ambition. He wants to get things done for the movement, not for himself. But, you know, when you say not 'for yourself' it's also a way for yourself because you express yourself through your work.

So it's not coincidental that with this restructuring towards more of a collective way of organising things he does realise – and this is not just about his ego – that the established or routine way of doing things can hamper some of the entrepreneurial drive. You know, to be decisive and give some major blows to the regime, and he proves this with Sasol, which takes place in June 1980 within six months of the setting up of Special Ops, that there is a need for some entrepreneurial drive...

Actually there were 3 major attacks within 15 months – Sasol, the power stations and Voortrekkerhoogte...

Yes. That's correct and it changes the picture, ups the ante, as the saying goes; these are hammer blows against the regime, huge inspiration for the people, psychological warfare at its best.

Now to talk in a very broad way about the context, of where Special Ops is situated. Special Ops actually emerges at the end of 1979, and you will find the actual decision is at the RC level. It was post the Tambo-Slovo-Mabhida trip to Vietnam and the writing of the *Green Book*. So that's an absolutely vital element to understand the Special Ops period, which is really from 1980 to

1990. To set the scene, if you like, I will deal with the armed struggle giving the background from 1950 which effectively leads to MK's birth in December 1961 and it'll situate Special Ops in context...

Actually Mac (Maharaj) dealt with the overall armed struggle at some length, from the way he saw it...

Good. I leave you to lead me on the history accounts of the decision to establish MK (Umkhonto we Sizwe) in 1961 within the context of the '50s and the ANC's previous adherence to non-violent struggle as Mac would have shown.

What I wish to underline is that any understanding of Special Ops must begin with an appreciation of MK and how its history and record unfolded from inception. Why was it formed, what are the circumstances that bring it about? You know all of that, it's well documented. And then the objectives of the armed struggle, and that's also well documented. But it needs further analysis, for instance, a key phrase in the MK Manifesto which I only came to elaborate very late, when I was training people in Angola, around about 1979/80...

In 1977, I was initially deployed in Angola as a political instructor and Regional Commissar until 1980. Then, from 1980 to 1984 I'm in Mozambique and Swaziland, from 1985 I work out of Lusaka, but I'm also working in Botswana and Swaziland and Zimbabwe as well up to 1990. It's *Operation Vula in 1990*; and setting up and arming of self defence units inside the country from 1990; but I'm not really involved in Special Ops...

Within the MK Manifesto there's a statement that says that we're willing to talk, we hope even at this late stage we will get to talk. It doesn't specifically say the then government, the National Party, would be able to get talks going to resolve conflict before we have civil war. But still it's a very important insight and clue which in 1961 we cadres paid no attention to and I'm a youngster then, working in Natal.

How old were you then?

I was born in 1938, so I'm actually 23 when I'm brought into the Regional Command of MK with Curnick Ndlovu as the Commander and Billy Nair as the Deputy Commander, and the fourth guy is Bruno Mtolo. We bring in Eric Mtshali a bit later, and then we start with our operations, December 1961. I can tell you that even with such senior comrades as Billy Nair, in terms of that Manifesto, I don't think we for a moment considered the possibility that at some stage talks would take place. We just saw this as a struggle until the point where we break the back of the National Party, but as it turns out, later we see the logic of the MK Manifesto, and it's de Klerk who is saying in 1990

that he's prepared to talk. I would also highlight what was really only a draft, and that is *Operation Mayibuye*, which needs to have notice taken of. It's really the authorship of Joe Slovo and Govan Mbeki. Braam Fischer was extremely critical of it. That's been referred to in various books.

Why was he critical?

Braam Fischer felt it was highly adventurous, and when you look at it, it's very romanticised, the idea of people parachuting into the country with weapons, etc. But there is an element there, I don't want to say of Joe Slovo's thinking, but Joe is the constant element, because he's in the MK leadership right through except for a short period post-1963 to 1969. He was not on Robben Island and he's playing this key role with Joe Modise in MK, and very involved even before the time that I'm talking about, 1977, when the RC goes for a restructuring after the 1976 uprising. He's involved in Africa from 1977 with some restructuring, reinforcing Joe Modise. That's post the '76 uprising when, of course, the ANC now is gearing up to retaliate with MK blows because MK has been in the doldrums for almost a decade. So Joe arrives in the forward areas from London. But he's been playing a role with MK as early as 1971 with *Project Aventura*, he's heavily involved in Somalia with the preparations of the combatants and the ship which he's been instrumental in purchasing...

The one that was meant to land along the Transkei coast? With (Alex) Mومbaris (a Greek internationalist) being the connection?...

Precisely. I was running Mومbaris from London. Slovo is very infused with guerrilla struggles and there is an echo of *Operation Mayibuye* in this – I'm not going to spend time on it but flag it – when you read *Operation Mayibuye*, when you look at *Operation Aventura*, Special Ops and so on, there is a thread running through which is quite strongly JS's influence and approach...

To understand his mindset, I need to mention that in '77 when the Wankie operation (the incursion into the then Rhodesia by the armed wings of the Zimbabwe African People's Union and the ANC) took place, JS, Yusuf Dadoo, the Party (South African Communist Party) in London were left totally out of the equation, weren't even consulted. It caught them by surprise and a guy with the ambitions of Joe who saw himself as being the foremost theorist of revolutionary warfare in our ranks – which he was – was dismayed.

And you know that the Wankie operation, of course, led to the Morogoro Conference in 1969, where he literally came to the fore. The Party at the time is really based in London, in an independent sense. Because the comrades in Lusaka and Tanzania, albeit leaders of the Party – Moses Kotane, JB Marks, Moses Mabhida and others – are so involved in ANC and MK work, they hardly pay any attention to Party work among the cadres in Africa. By the way, very similar to the Party in government post-1994. There's something about this

that keeps coming back – I'm not going to say to haunt us – but to make us realise how within a national liberation struggle, the Party sees the role of the ANC as so important then and now, and gets subsumed, certainly tailing behind the ANC and its requirements.

So the Party in London was rather distant, and JS and Yusuf Dadoo were constantly, to their credit, trying to find ways to make the SACP relevant. Certainly as the Party speaking in its own voice within the country, so a lot of our propaganda was Party propaganda, but we were also playing a role for the ANC – and very much that was the connection between Yusuf and Joe and Oliver Tambo. I think Kotane had his stroke around that time, before '77 maybe.

An anecdote is Joe telling me – we were very, very close in those 10 years, we were like buddies – and he said to me that in his dreams – he foresaw a situation in which a black taxi driver knocks over a white child, the white parents intervene in a rage and club the taxi driver, and black people retaliate, the cops weigh in and it's just a knock-on effect which leads to a popular uprising. This is before '76 when we were really in the doldrums, '65 to '75, that decade. So there is something of the romantic in Joe, and I've used the term 'revolutionary entrepreneurship'. I suppose all revolutionaries are romantic dreamers at heart.

And there was something about the romance factor that kept us going, that kept hope and optimism alive, and drove people like Joe Slovo, who is highly privileged living in London, who could have developed his career as Harold Wolpe did as a leading academic or whatever, but chose instead to dig his heels in and stick to his guns, no pun intended, of the revolution.

It was during those 10 years where things weren't really happening from an MK perspective within the country at any rate, notwithstanding the Wankie operations in Zimbabwe, which actually in the end fizzled out. It was difficult to stick to one's guns. And I remember him saying to me there were times when Lenin up to 1914, at the outbreak of the war, had been thinking of going to do journalistic work in America, so this kind of tension and pull is there within Joe's mind too. Remember his wife (Ruth First) is making a career for herself as an academic and as a writer, related to Africa as well. So, like Wolpe, there was that aspect of a career that he could have chiselled out for himself.

Let me also deal with a grievous defect of our approach from exile – the 1973 strike movement which broke out in Durban. That should have been a signal sign to us in exile that the Black working class was on the rise. We applauded but ignored those strikes. Our focus should have become organising within the working class at home, changing course from a purely military focus, and redirecting some trained cadres to return home to integrate into that movement.

In fact as Black Consciousness developed among Black youth and students, a group of militant white students inspired by the Paris uprising of 1968, had been working with black workers in what they called the Wages Commission of NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) to research labour issues and educate and assist Black workers. The fruits of this became even more apparent with the growth of the black workers trade unions and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) in 1985.

But getting back to MK's evolution: phase 1 would be the period leading from the 1950s culminating in the Sharpeville massacre, the banning of the ANC to the creation of MK, December 1961. It was really '61 to '63 in a sense where MK is created, there are sabotage operations, there's an idea of something akin to *Operation Mayibuye*, there are people being sent out for training abroad whilst MK operations were underway. They were being trained abroad but they've got a ready-made internal network; in other words an underground structure in the country to receive them. From that base or platform they would be integrated to reinforce the armed actions underway to a guerrilla warfare stage. The emphasis was very much on the Military at a time when it could very well have, and should have, been more balanced with underground political preparation.

And I think that if you look at *Operation Mayibuye*, you'll see how that's divorced from mass political activity, from economic development – in other words the political economy of South Africa and the possibilities of mass struggle and organisation of the working class. The initial MK activity fizzles out with the huge police crack-down post the Rivonia arrests of July 1963. For a brief period Wilton Mkwayi, with SACP support, attempts to revive MK with David Kitson, Lalloo Chiba, Mac Maharaj and a couple of other people. Mac's not on that Command but he's a key adjunct of that Command and on trial with the Mkwayi group after they are caught in 1965. For another year or so Bram Fischer is trying to organise the Party. That comes to an end with his arrest in 1966 after he had gone underground. So the phase of '61 to '63 does have a little reverberation after; there's a hang-on. Actually this first phase is then '61 to say '65 to be precise.

The second phase is from 1966 to '69. In that brief period and thereafter we are trying to regroup and we have externally now possibly close to maybe a thousand trained cadres. I wouldn't say much more than that. We had an underground railway operating from '61 to '63; then we lost that with the internal network or underground. Cadres were in a sense marooned outside. We've trained them. We were being trained at about 200 at a time in the Soviet Union, and I was there with (Joe) Modise, (Moses) Mabhida and others in Odessa for almost a year in 1964 and this continued on and off after that, depending on the availability of providing cadres for training.

There was another Odessa intake in '65 after our group, consisting of Joe Jele, Mosie Moola and others which brings that to about 400. Then there were comrades who were being trained in Moscow 1963 onwards. Initially that was the Chris Hani-Lennox Lagu group. And then some others, a few individuals, trained in Czechoslovakia. Nobody from Cuba at that stage. I think we are talking about 800 trained MK cadres based in the Kongwa camp in Tanzania. Instead of going home from training they began to feel frustrated and bored. The breakdown of structures back home and difficulties of re-infiltration builds up pressure on the leadership. This leads to the decision to re-infiltrate through the then Rhodesia and the incursions into Zimbabwe in '67 and '68. So you have a second phase, '66 to '69 and I'm saying we are broken in the country, and the second point, we've trained cadres outside, very politically conscious cadres raring to get back home and fight the Boers...

It's very militarist, the thinking, so there's no focus on, hey guys, lets first recreate our political links in the country, and instead it's a very much this *Guevaraist* idea especially as enunciated by Regis Debray. This is his theory of the *foco* – create a guerrilla base which becomes the focus for a popular armed uprising. This *foco* will spread like an oil patch through armed actions and build an armed political movement in its wake.

But this totally misreads what was happening in Cuba because they had a base amongst the people in those mountains in the first place and even in the urban centres which already constituted a political movement which had survived the repression. In those mountains were peasants who have been in rebellion against landlords and had taken to the hills and forests and were living, working and surviving there. The cities had a long history of anti-dictatorship resistance.

The Sierra Maestra mountains are where Fidel decides they will establish their initial base amongst the people and link with organisations in the urban areas. We just don't do our homework, we just regard the people in South Africa as a mass – rural and urban; there's been very little study about the rural situation, and for obvious reasons the focus on the sabotage campaign has been urban. So, this is also a dynamic that must be grasped in assessing the reason for the way Special Ops developed along with MK and our strategic objectives which veered along militarist lines in the exile context I have alluded to.

We are cut off from our people, a long, long way from home. So we send in armed combatants across the Zambezi river into the then Rhodesia; they are given a very vague objective: fight your way through Zimbabwe into South Africa and set up guerrilla bases – locate the people yourselves. The two theatres of combat were Wankie or Hwange August 1967, and Sipolilo in 1968. Our comrades gave a good account of themselves but failed in the objective of reaching home, save for a small number who were ultimately captured.

It was not without any merit. We said this was a baptism of fire and indeed it was. MK cadres gained that experience and confidence of being able to actually get involved in armed actions but of course it didn't achieve its objectives and in a sense the setbacks and criticisms are what led to the Morogoro Conference of 1969. The Morogoro Conference is part of this second phase, critically analysing the situation and its setbacks and challenges, and charting a way forward.

To look at the Morogoro Conference, what is very important is the realisation of needing to get to grips with political work – political organisation as a base for MK – and getting the Military and Political combined. But its lip service, by the way, even though Joe Slovo is an architect of the *Strategy & Tactics* document. He's exclusively the author; but it's an amazing thing because he does the writing and theorising; and then is given the practical task of being key to its implementation.

If you're in exile as we were, it was much easier to think in terms of military work rather than long term political work. We lacked the dynamic connection with the working class and rural people which could have pointed us in the direction of longer term political preparation in actual practice.

It's so much easier to think along military commando tactics lines, because you have your MK cadres trained, you have an idea that the military goes in, they set up secret bases and they start striking at the Boers. Many of the '76 generation exits the country and say we want weapons and we want to go back and hit the enemy. So, there's this impatient militarist attitude. Operations begin to rise in number and impact and certainly energise and inspire the masses. It works, it's effective and encourages such a focus.

The 1976 milestone marks the end of the third phase (1970-75). This is followed by a fourth phase (1976-1979), culminating in a fifth phase, (1980 to 1990) – the most active and intense of MK's history which at its conclusion approaches 'People's War'. It's at the onset of this period that Special Ops is created and functions alongside the conventional MK structures.

Of course, these phases of the armed struggle aren't like silos, they overlap and interact.

So, in terms of the third phase (1970-75) within the country - which we are not paying enough attention to – it's the stirrings of the Black Consciousness Movement which is now infusing people like Sphiwe Nyanda, these youngsters and so many others, and the role that some White students and intellectuals at the universities play, people like Dave Hemson, with links to the trade union movement. There's also Martin Legassick, who, alongside Harold Wolpe, is paying theoretical attention to labour issues in South Africa and reviving a study of the changing economy and the role of labour.

I only recently bought Legassick's memoir and collected writings. You know, I think we were too tough on him. He was one of us, he was ANC, he worked with Tambo in the London office...This particular group which linked to the unions, I think, for our sins, we have under-estimated, and we disdainfully called the Trotskyist Left.

Alright, so you start actually getting new recruits, the first in a decade, looking to join MK. You have this big change: the Portuguese coup – actually an anti-fascist rebellion by the army; the revolutionary developments in Angola and Mozambique; in Durban the Frelimo rally in 1975. This is a sea change, a turning point. At the end of that third phase the pot is bubbling. Sphiwe Nyanda, Tokyo Sexwale and that generation are products. Rashid soon follows. There have been the strikes in Namibia in '72, the strikes in Durban '73, there was the Wages Commission. One needs to pay credit to NUSAS activists. At the same time, there's the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement, with Steve Biko and Richard Turner. So there's this movement in the country taking place 1968/9 to '75.

As a result of this, there are forward elements, advanced elements, Sphiwe Nyanda and a number of others, are coming across the borders in dribs and drabs because the ANC now has a window of opportunity out of Maputo into Swaziland. Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and Albert Dlomo operate in Swaziland from 1975-6 organising links with South Africans, more political-type work and political contacts. So before '76 there is some ordnance going in, a little bit of training. And there are a couple of actions which occur including inadvertent skirmishes with border patrols. In the period '61 to '63, there are over 200 recorded MK operations but from '63 to '75, apart from the Zimbabwe operations, there are virtually no planned MK operations – possibly a handful. To be sure, one would need to interview Sphiwe.

We then get the fourth period 1976-79 with the Soweto uprising which becomes country-wide. And this then is a big window of opportunity for the ANC and MK, Communist Party. So we have this huge exodus, of students mainly, coming through Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and being directed through to Angola, where we now also have military bases. We had had some bases in Tanzania before. We could do some training in a semi-clandestine way in Zambia. Both countries are not able to provide sustained support and there's also political aspects and intrigue, especially in Zambia in relation to us, but also Tanzania.

You know, MK was not allowed to even have a base in Tanzania in 1970; there were internal problems for Nyerere. And the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) was involved, if I have this right; there were allegations that Nyerere took seriously that the ANC and MK had become involved in attempts by his opponents to overthrow him, and he fell for it. You know, very typical of what is happening

in South Africa today – conspiracy theories; and I was told by comrades of that time that it was the PAC behind it, and the ANC was always up against being undermined and smeared by anti-Communist allegations. 'They are trained in Russia and are led by Whites and Indians' allegations.

However, it was the Soviet Union that saved us. Almost the entire contingent of MK in Tanzania was sent over to the Soviet Union and were there for a full year of productive training until we could reinstate ourselves in Tanzania through diplomatic manoeuvring. At the top level Comrade Tambo worked very hard to show Nyerere that the ANC was not plotting against him. In that period I don't know how many hundreds of our cadres were based in the Crimea, in the Perevalne military establishment. This is where you would need to speak to older comrades like Jackie Modise just to put you in the picture. I'm way over in London at the time so there are other comrades of that generation who could explain this setback.

Okay, so those are the problems with that third phase in 1970, leading up to '76. We are now reinstated in Africa, Zambia as well as Tanzania, but we've now also got these bases in Mozambique and in Angola. The advantage of Mozambique is it's a real forward area, it's on the border of South Africa and it has the soft country, Swaziland, which we could use as a transit area to get into South Africa. Yes, we had to be careful, a lot of comrades were assassinated there by Boer hit squads. I was very involved with Zuma there, initially and then later.

And then we are dealing with this constant outpouring of young recruits from 1976 right through to 1990. JS was in London in 1976, as already mentioned. He was now so popular with MK comrades that they are demanding people like JS should be in Africa. He obliges and works with Joe Modise, who he had a good relationship with in the past. Modise had an up and down position within MK, they chopped and changed quite a bit, it was very difficult from 1966 to 1975 and his position at times was unclear. There were periods when MK cadres were just being sent for cycles of retraining. There were very few recruits coming out of the country before 1975

In that period, comrades were given other tasks, international solidarity, or even helping to develop the ANC's infrastructure in Zambia outside of the military, such as building houses. Joe Modise at that time did a lot of work developing the ANC's infrastructure. MK people were settling down, some of them, with Zambian families, and some with wives who followed them from home, so a more settled community was taking place. Tambo was Commander in Chief and JM (Modise) was commander of MK at the time of the incursions into Zimbabwe.

Slovo teams up with Modise in 1977. They are now effectively head and deputy of MK operations under the RC. This command didn't extend to Angola where

Mzwai Piliso was in overall command of the camps. One camp fell under the two Joe's – Funda just outside Luanda. It's a small camp which takes about, say, 30 to 40 people. It's under the direct command of Obadi (Montso Mokgabudi). Slovo first met Rashid who was training there in 1977.

Obadi is working for MK Special Operations and they were recruiting the most promising cadres from the other Angolan camps. At that stage, I was a political instructor at the Quibaxe camp some 200 kms north-east of Luanda. The main training camp was at Novo Catengue outside Benguela in the South; a temporary camp in Benguela; and initially in 1975-76 the first recruits were accommodated at an Engineering section of FAPLA (People's Armed Forces Of Liberation of Angola) in Luanda. That's '77. I was deployed at Quibaxe and the following year, until 1980, became the Regional Commissar for Angola.

I had met Rashid in London early 1977. He goes to the ANC office, and Reg September arranges for Rashid to meet me. Rashid's been in Belgium and I then arrange for Rashid to go to the GDR (East Germany) for training, then to Funda in Angola, where he's given a role as an instructor.

Funda had comrades who were specifically selected to go back to the country. You see the Joe's now, their interest, they were put in charge of MK operations, not the training, not any of these other things, and they now want the best guys to come in who could be infiltrated into the country with weapons or they can pick up weapons through the ordnance network. Jacob Zuma was in charge for the then Natal machinery.

Siphiwe Nyanda is operating machinery dealing with the Transvaal Urban machinery. Then there's the Transvaal Rural machinery headed by Comrade Mansheka, an 'old salt' as the 1961 generation are termed. A Natal military machinery was headed by Siphiwe Nyanda's brother, Douglas – his MK name. He – Zweli Nyanda – was killed by Eugene de Kock in 1982. The Eastern and Western Cape and Free state fell under Chris Hani and Lambert Moloi.

Prior to this, in the early 1970s, I gave some assistance in training from London – we infiltrated some comrades home using some internationalists to help us. These included recruits from London. We sent them to Botswana to help both Chris and Lambert Moloi infiltrate what we called the 'island' – code-name for Lesotho to set up political and military structures there.

The Lesotho Command worked more skilfully because their structures operated organically. This is the brilliance of Chris. Maybe because he was freed up from the Militarists from Lusaka, his approach was good. He's had the lesson himself from the Wankie incursion. And they do things in a more integrated manner, not separate and in silos. And because of that, you'd find that - and this has never been said to me but I'm surmising - that they were not over-anxious to prove themselves by just injecting people into the country and carrying out hit

and run military operations. That word 'injecting' was used by the MK Commanders – and some of us were quite disdainful about it. It referred to sending people into the country to carry out armed action and come back to base. We saw this as being something where you could get some headlines but you were building nothing. So Chris was trying to build structures inside the country, very little attention is being paid to that, very little writing on that.

The key operations are coming out really through Botswana and Swaziland and it's the two Joe's using the military machineries. There were machineries operating of the military kind and ordnance out of Botswana as well. Cassius Make was also involved. Keith Mokoape and Snuki Zikalala worked under Joe Modise in Botswana. Joe Slovo was working out of Maputo with Obadi, who was re-deployed from Funda, Paul Dikeledi and subsequently Rashid.

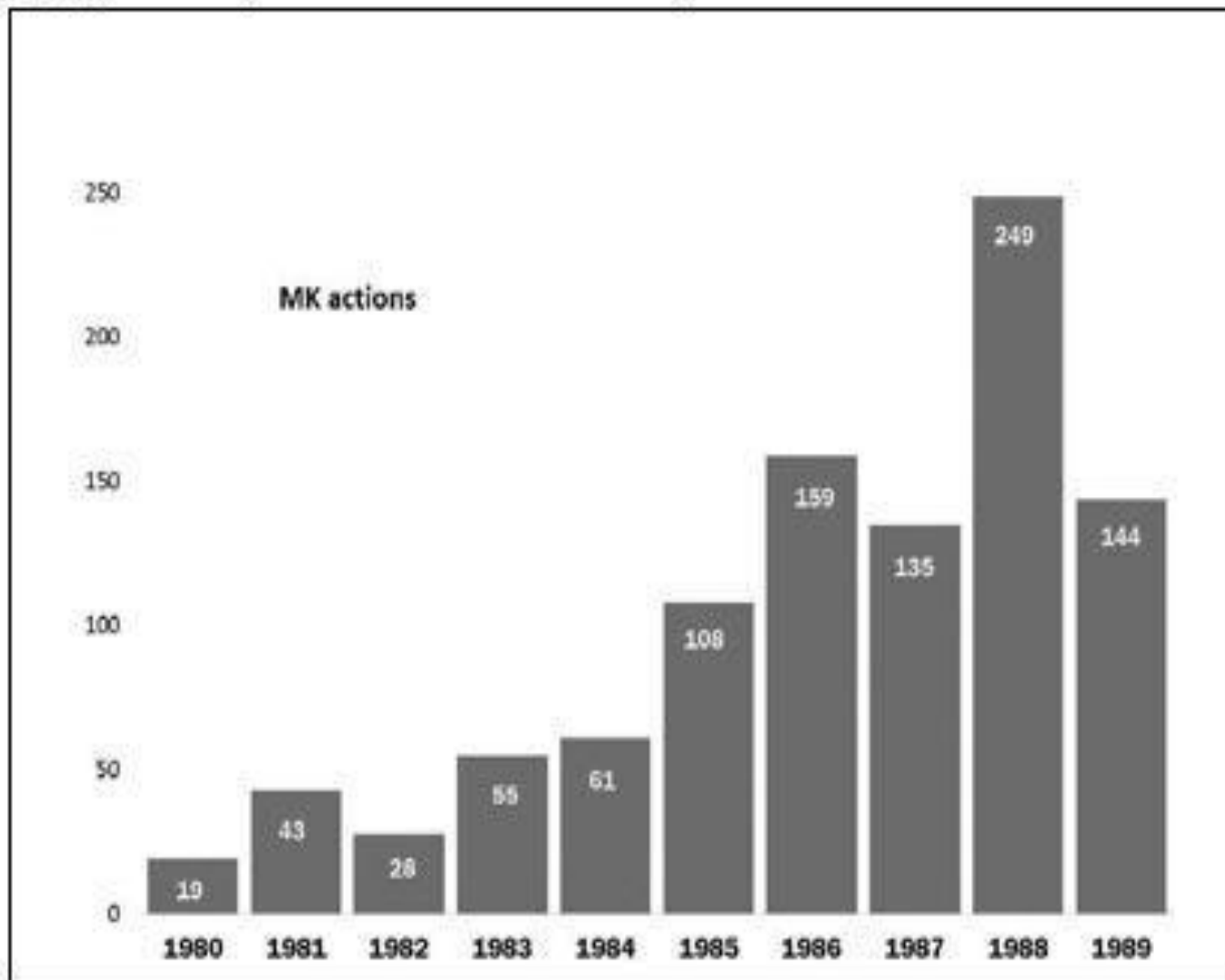
When it comes to Special Ops, you must also include the role of the internationalists whose assistance was both heroic and indispensable. Klaas de Jonge, who's now in Amsterdam, knows many of them. But I must hand it to Rashid. He really had the art of developing contacts and using them well. Other MK comrades were engaged with internationalists, especially from Maputo, but Rashid had the art of drawing out the best from them. This was also because he had such a detailed approach to his work; he was so painstaking that he was able to give them such detailed instructions. And I know from working with London recruits – to use the term of the book (*The London Recruits*) – that when you are able to be detailed with them and specific, they were prepared to work with us much more, and we were able to get much more out of them.

You must also meet Guido (Van Hecken) – he's in Belgium. There's Hélène (Passtoors). And others, I can't remember their names. There's also Oscar (Marleyn) who worked with Rashid. He was based in Maputo. He lives now in Johannesburg. There were also internationalists before Rashid joined Special Ops. JS was in Maputo in '77 and Ruth First was there. So some of the internationalists were helping from before Special Ops. There was a two-pronged approach, with Modise working from Lusaka through Botswana and Slovo from Maputo into Swaziland. But the two were working together and reporting to the RC.

JS develops these contacts in Maputo and Rashid joined him in 1980 and he's brilliant at that, to be sure. Also, there's Ed Wethli – he was smuggling in heavy equipment. Also Mohammed Timol – though he worked there mainly in Intelligence. There's also George Nene who might have been involved with Obadi at the beginning of Special Ops and certainly with Siphwe Nyanda. Also Sue Rabkin who is also close to JS, Rashid and the internationalists. They'll also give you insights into the Political-Military tensions and how that plays out.

Anyway, to come back to the fourth phase, 1976 to '79, there seems to have been 39 operations carried out by comrades like Siphwe Nyanda and Solly Shoke inside the country. They attack the Moroka and Booyens police stations and other targets. They use RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) – a new development. So we have some initial operations before the next phase, which begins in 1980.

You must look at the graph produced by Maryland College, USA It sets out the MK operations. You can see in 1989, at the height, there are 250 operations. In 1981, for example, there are between 40 and 50 operations. You will find that most of the big operations were done by Special Operations starting with 1980 June, the Sasol operation. And also very important for Special Ops is the *Green Book* – and we need to discuss that...



To focus more specifically on Special Ops. What was its exact role? Its main operations? Its achievements? Its strengths and weaknesses?

Special Ops evolved out of MK attempts at developing armed actions post the Soweto uprising. Prior to that, there was no such thing as Special Ops in MK. This is a period, not only of reviving the ANC, but particularly MK, and it's not just a revival of a structure, but a revival of the people.

And what is decided in terms of meeting the upsurge and the swelling of the ranks after '76, is the need to carry out armed propaganda actions quickly in order to demonstrate to the masses that the ANC, MK, has the ability, the capacity, to strike back and deliver a psychological blow against the regime.

The two Joe's are identifying, largely through Obadi and Johnny Sexwale, Tokyo's younger brother, who's also in Angola, good comrades for MK to work with. I get to know Obadi and him quite well. And JS is in Angola in '77 still when I'm there, in and out from Mozambique to Angola, where they set up the training camp outside Luanda where Rashid was – that's Funda. And Funda is set up primarily to cream off the best of the recruits in Angola for MK operations, not that others won't follow, but the best. So Siphwe is one of them. And they identify these characters who are then sent to Modise and Slovo. And if you look at the operations that occur post '76, remember we haven't had operations for about a dozen years.

And now there's the Solomon Mahlangu attempt in '77 – that was a quick turnaround of somebody that they'd identified as very keen, impressive, who would manage with a six-week training or similar short programme. I don't know exactly how long he was trained for, but I think it was a short term. To get such a person back into the country with an instruction to carry out some quick operation, be it an attack on police, or using explosives on targets deemed fit, that was the aim.

And the Silverton trio are similar guys who were going to attack, I think, some police post outside Pretoria and they get tracked down. So, this is where the comrades retreated into the bank and the shoot-out took place. You've got to look at the operations '77 to say '80 and you will see that those operations were not Special Ops types.

But you know what happens? Joe Slovo is a man who's always looking for the angles. You know we can describe Slovo's many qualities; this was an amazing person. I think one of the key elements was that he was always looking for the angles in terms of where the enemy is weak and we maximising the force, the impact of the operations; and, in a sense, in armed struggle and even in

regular warfare, there is a structure called Special Operations. That's the cream of the crop and they're reserved for strategic blows, whilst the general army is carrying out the overall aspects of the struggle. Now in May 1980, there's the Sasol attack, the first Special Ops operation.

It must be round about 1980 that I come to Maputo and Joe explains to me that he's now heading Special Ops as this particular arm to carry out strategic blows, that they'll identify key targets that will make maximum impact. And he explains to me that, as with this pending operation at Sasol, you're requiring like six months of preparation. But your on-going generalised MK actions are actions that need to take place from week to week. At that stage, as our forces are building up, it might be once a month or so, and it starts rapidly increasing over the coming years.

With Special Ops, there was Sasol 1 and another attempt at Sasol where Barney (Molokoane) got killed. There's the Voortrekkerhoogte Operation, the Church Street bombing and a number of operations. There's Koeberg – that was a very easy thing. It just dropped into their lap. Actually, they did nothing. We can come back to that.

Special Ops needed a special selection of people. You actually start with identifying your target and then they start looking for people living in that area. Is there somebody who's got a contact within Sasol? Joe Slovo was actually – through the FRELIMO connection in Maputo – taken to the power stations and shown how they operate, so that Special Ops could then work out where the weak spot was to hit the place with a big charge so that the whole place would close down and do the maximum damage. So, he's working on this for six months

Obadi is the Commander of Special Ops based there and Rashid comes and joins them in 1980 or shortly thereafter, I think. He comes in there, after the previous Commander was killed on the border, a guy called Chris (Nungu; MK name, George Douglas). He was hit with a rocket waiting for somebody at the Oshoek border post. There were two of them in that car, it turned to ash.

So, what had occurred in the thinking? It's basically that Slovo looking for the angles convinced Modise that they need some specialised operations of this kind and Modise readily goes along with Joe Slovo, even though the advent of Special Ops kind of undermines Modise's role to some degree because it gets all the publicity. Modise doesn't react in negative ways and they get on well. So Slovo is instrumental in this thinking and he would have spoken to Oliver Tambo and got Tambo to accept this. That's how it would have moved on.

Joe doesn't bring in too many others. A lot of people at the Revolutionary Council would've opposed Joe and the idea because there was envy of Slovo and they also might rightly say that we're not at that advanced stage of putting

all the energy into building MK instead of building the political underground - and that would have been a good point.

These things are always trade-offs. I think Joe's compelling reasoning was that by carrying out some of these huge operations, we're going to attract many recruits, and it's so good for the morale within MK, it'll inspire people to emulate that. Also, you make this massive publicity internationally, which is what happens with Sasol.

So, it evolves, I would say, in that sense it's not a great theoretical leap, it's an angle that Joe Slovo realises. Now if we can borrow terms from economists, this is actually the master stroke of an entrepreneur, and Joe's got that entrepreneurial spirit about him. He doesn't sit back and just carry on in a ritualistic manner; he's looking for those angles.

I think they send people off for special training. It's easy to arrange, he's the top man in the Communist Party, and it can be done with the Cubans, the GDR (East Germany) and Soviets - and you can get some extra specialised training. And the idea, I think, of getting the limpets into the country actually comes from Joe. Maybe Rashid had something to do with this. Here again, it's Joe looking for new angles - as you know, the limpet is used against shipping, by your frogmen going underwater. But Joe realises this was so simple and it would be a fantastic weapon in our arsenal. And they prove it that way. It's got some defects because it's supposed to be underwater and therefore, in hot conditions, it might accelerate, which is why a few tragedies take place.



A young Ronnie Kasrils, Facebook

Which was the most successful operation carried out by Special Ops?

Oh, Sasol definitely. It was a crippling blow to the economy. This is a strategic element of the South Africa economy, the whole oil factor. There are the sanctions and the boycotts, and that's a very vulnerable aspect for the regime then. It's a flagship of the apartheid regime. The action was spectacular - you could actually see the result from Soweto, and that's many kilometres away. I don't know if Special Ops realised that the effect would be so huge.

Apparently Slovo was sitting on the balcony that night of his flat in Maputo actually expecting to see the flames of the Secunda operation.

Really?

So, I'm told. Maybe, he wouldn't have been able to see it from there, but perhaps he sat there anxious about it being successful and about the comrades who went in coming back safely?

Well, it's not so far as the crow flies. Maybe difficult to see properly because of the Lebombo Mountain range between South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique. From Lebombo, that's the border, I was amazed when I was doing reconnaissance for routes, and we came to a spot in Lebombo where I could see Maputo. It was an absolutely clear day and I was shocked. I thought God, there's Maputo! And you look in the other direction and I suppose from there you probably could've seen the fire in the reflection in the sky. Maybe someone told him that. You know Barney Molokoane and these guys, they had such a gift of the gab (laughter), they probably would've said Comrade Slovo, I tell you, you'll see the flames from Maputo. And Joe is a sweet guy, he had a naivete so he could even have fallen for something like that.

Apart from Sasol, which other operation really struck you?

Voortrekkerhoogte.

That didn't hit the target...

No, but they showed that we could bring big fire power within range of the army headquarters. So, it's Voortrekkerhoogte, and because it was the army base outside Pretoria, and also the choice of the weapon at Voortrekkerhoogte, Barney and them used a Grad-P field weapon which fires a rocket.

Then there's the Church Street bomb, which kills and injures a number, and the regime tries to make out they were civilians but many of them were air force personnel. That's in the heart of Pretoria. I would say they're on a par in terms of armed propaganda.

What about Koeberg?

Yes, Koeberg was a huge blow to the regime, they were building this plant, and, yes, it was spectacular. But I can't recall it making the kind of impact that the other three did. Now two of the other three certainly are in the heart, the capital, of the country, Pretoria. So, yes, you can say Koeberg is obviously a big blow, but not like the other three. I said to you just now it's something that falls into their lap. They hardly have to do any bloody thing apart from give (former Koeberg employee) Rodney (Wilkinson) limpet bombs (laughter). They give Rodney the limpets and that's it, you know. It hardly ranks as Special Ops. It could've easily been given to Gebuza or someone in MK to do.

You said that Slovo told you about the pending Sasol operation?

Yes.

But wasn't Special Ops meant to operate with the strictest need-to-know ethos? Why would Slovo – never mind your seniority – tell you about it unless he was drawing you into Special Ops or needed some specific advice?

No, I must correct myself, I don't think he told me in advance, he explained it after it happened.

Did you have any idea beforehand that it was going to happen?

No, I was new to Maputo. You see, I'd arrived in Maputo in April, this happened at the end of May. And I was now very busy with Jacob Zuma. No, Joe didn't tell me. It's when it happened, almost immediately – he couldn't contain himself, by the way (laughter). He then explained everything and what he had done, including going into the power station in Maputo. In terms of that kind of need-to-know aspect, Joe was very good. After the fact, you know, there was a vanity with Joe certainly (laughter)...

Did you know though before Sasol that Special Ops existed?

I don't think I knew it existed.

How did you actually hear about the Sasol bombing? Can you remember where you were, what you were doing and what your immediate reaction was?

Well, it was in the news immediately. I think I heard it on the radio. I was staying with Mohammed Timol (MK name, Farouk). Timol used to listen to the news on the hour, every hour, all the time, from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to sleep (laughter).

Can you recall your response?

Absolutely elated. Wow, what an incredible operation and it was full in the newspapers! Everyone's talking about it. There was absolute elation that MK managed to pull off an operation of this kind.

I think they attacked three Sasol targets at the same time...

The third one didn't work out...

Yes, because this guy Bogart, who was one of the people in Maputo with Lennox, they were in on the know, they were support for JS and Obadi and company. And I know that Bogart had manufactured one of the devices, at least the timer for it, which failed to go off...

So then, Joe tells you about the Sasol operations immediately after they happened. Did you have any idea about what other operations

they were planning? Because very shortly after that you had the power station attacks and also Voortrekkerhoogte, all within a period of about 15 months?

No, we didn't work that way, not at all, it's only afterwards I got to know.

So after an operation Joe would say it was Special Ops?

Yes.



Ronnie Kasrils in an anti-apartheid march in London, Socialist Worker

You were never involved at all in Special Ops?

No, I could have been peripheral, you know. We were working in our own structures. I can't recall whether I might've identified people for them, that's part of the work. I must say that with Obadi, Joe and Rashid they worked very well in terms of the secrecy factor and other things. They didn't boast at all. We knew that there was the Special

Ops residence in Matola, and I was taken there sometimes; I did this with all the residences ...

And then in terms of assisting Rashid, particularly in terms of border crossings, I played a small part, but he assisted me too. I was constantly looking for crossing points because we had casualties as they all used the same crossings over and over, and I realised this, and I loved that kind of work, reconnaissance in the terrain, getting away from bureaucracy at the offices. So, I found a number of totally different crossings. The Siteki crossing, for example, that kind of area away from the normal crossings – it's over on the Lebombo Mountain range. So, I had found new crossings that I would've given to Obadi and others; the same with Botswana.

Rashid also asked me to train H el ene and Klaas in terms of surveillance, counter-surveillance, enemy targets and so on inside. And just after the Kabwe Conference when he had picked up that there was some threat to H el ene, I think, he asked me to go, he couldn't go himself, to Zimbabwe and link up with Louise Colvin who worked for him. She was in Special Ops. He tells me her address and how to contact her. She's absolutely freaked out because she suspects maybe I could be an agent.

She didn't know Ronnie Kasrils?

I came there with a cap and a scarf and so on. It was a stormy night in Harare, one of these nights where you think it must be an agent with the knock-knock on the door (laughter) and it was an absolutely foul night (laughter). And I laugh at her when we talk about it later.

The other aspect was linking with H el ene – she was a Special Ops operative who made the error of getting involved with Ebie (Ebrahim Ebrahim) who’s in another underground structure. So, she mixes the two and there’s this whole Operation Mango, which was mine. We called it *Operation Mango* because the crossing point which I had given her, which had never been used at that point, was near a mountain called something like Mango. You know it was an acronym, I turned into *Mango*. And the way the Boers went on in court, it was *Operation Mango!* They thought Mango must be the bombs and it was this geographical feature called something like Ognam Mountain and I just said, okay, Mango by twisting the letters around (laughter).

Rashid particularly really trusted me. You know I was kind of the key person bringing him in and he was marvelous to work with. Short-fused, Rashid, that’s my estimate. But brilliant. To this day, I rate him with Barney Molokoane, Obadi, Siphwe.

You know, everything merges, because after a while I’m not thinking I’m doing something for Special Ops, it’s part of MK work. And there are people who have my confidence and trust and know that I can assist in some way. So, you’d get from Obadi through to Rashid, comrades raising some things. And Rashid very much, he’s also a guy who looks for the angles. So, I can see it now, he would say to me with always a bit of a smile, which I like about him, what do you think about something, without telling me that it’s linked to any operation they were planning.

He’d come to me and he’d start like, with a bit of an ‘er,’ then he would say, er, you know you once told me you had a crossing point in this area, is it possible that you could show me where and brief me so could we put someone through? You see, Rashid worked to the book. So, he wouldn’t come and just try and pick my brain and then use the crossing point, which could be detrimental because maybe I’m going to be using it that week. So, he would lay his cards on the table, but on a need-to-know basis. Not saying this is a Special Ops mission, and this is so and so. But it would be, look, I need to get someone across, it needs to have a road nearby and a car coming past in that area. I would never say no to him.

What do you think were some of the weaknesses of Special Ops? Of course, you weren’t directly involved, but from your vantage point?

Well, of course, to really note the weaknesses you’ve got to be inside there. And a lot of weaknesses are subjective aspects, which Rashid can explain. But I

would first of all say that the weaknesses there are not so specific to Special Ops, they were weaknesses of MK in general and the whole struggle. This was related to the long lines of communication, the long lines of travel to get into the country and to get out, and the reporting processes. Secondly, the fact everybody is grappling with is the problem of settling your structure inside the country so that you minimise the coming in and the going out and the dependence on the outside. Therefore, you're open to infiltration. You're also facing the same kind of problems of MK generally – in terms of enemy agents infiltrating.

I don't know if Special Ops had penetration of that kind. I would say in favour of Special Ops that they had the advantage in funding that Slovo could mobilise for the specific operations, which put them in a more favourable situation than MK structures in general where you had to make do with the funding and spread it out. So, per operation they clearly would've had much greater capital than would've been provided to other units.

And they also had an advantage because they had people such as Joe Slovo, and those close to him like Mohammed Timol and Sue Rabkin and people like that, who could provide them contacts with people like Klaas and Hélène and so many other expats from Belgium, the Netherlands and Britain. They had the support structure of people who could drive in and out very easily from Mozambique and Swaziland into South Africa and, therefore, could bring in the heavy equipment that they used for Voortrekkerhoogte, for example.

And Rashid in particular, out of a lot of the MK comrades I knew, and I would say here a person like Sipiwe Nyanda and Tami Zulu to certain degree, were very mobile and highly sophisticated and had a lot of connections because they were not just stuck in one particular township before they left South Africa, they had moved around a bit – unlike many of the other MK guys who had come outside without having ever been outside their own township or even a part of their township. They might have lived in a part and they'd never been to other parts.



Ronnie Kasrils, with Sipiwe Nyanda (left) and Joe Modise (centre), DDR

Rocky Williams says
“the effects of the strategy of Special Ops were twofold. On the one hand it resulted in a situation where the Special Operations Division due to its profile, responsibilities and capabilities began to

assume a much greater responsibility for the conduct of internal military operations than it should have done. So the preferential location of Special Ops under the command of Tambo created a degree of resentment and mistrust amongst MK rank and file and it strained relations between the division and Army Commander Joe Modise, a phenomenon not unusual within those armed forces that maintain Special Ops” and he also says “the criticism from the left within the movement maintained that spectacular military operations like Voortrekkerhoogte were no substitute for the task of rooting the military underground in the local population”. What’s your response to Rocky’s views?

That’s quite useful and he probably interviewed a few people to pick these things up. But I think it’s not quite correct. Certainly, I’d take issue with the point that Special Operations detracted us from our need to root MK amongst the people. Special Operations didn’t; it’s the stage we were going through, the specific problems we faced, as I’ve been at pains to mention, the whole of MK, the difficulties of rooting ourselves in the population; so it’s not fair to say it’s Special Ops that was detracting us from that.

If anything, it would be Slovo’s hands-on attempts to strengthen the capacity of MK that brings it home to him what others had been arguing from the political side, amongst them myself by the way, but Sue Rabkin is very much involved and Sunny Singh. The people on the political side are saying that we can never get past the point we’re in now if we don’t focus a lot of our energy on building underground structures. In other words, getting really good people, trained comrades, not simply for armed operations, but who know and understand the role of clandestine organisation.

So, that was a view we put in a very bold way in the heated debates taking place. It didn’t follow that people trained for Special Operations or classical MK operations were not trained in clandestine activity and did not have clearly in their minds the fact that we had to create political underground structures to assist the returning cadres – which was where we set off from, in 1961-63. But the rug was pulled from under our feet and we didn’t exist inside in the country and we had to rely then on trained comrades going in, and carrying out armed actions in order to set up some semblance of support.

So, it’s not as though the argument from us wanting to build the political structures was hundred percent correct and the Special Ops people or MK military operatives were completely wrong. They themselves were striving for that. I would say that where we were a little bit off the mark was that a lot of the resources, funding as well as the most capable people, would be at the head of the queue for MK and Special Ops, so some resentment would naturally arise, which is what Rocky points to.

But I think that sometimes comrades in interviews of the kind Rocky would've done maybe four or five years after 1990 would've been saying there was some resentment, but it wasn't manifest at all while we were engaging in the struggle. So, I would say that would not hold in terms of a key problem that we had. Not at all, and I deliberately said to you earlier that the two Joe's were complementary, the one – Modise – focused on MK as a whole, and the other – Slovo – on Special Ops.

And let me also just remind us that in 1983 when we set up Military Headquarters, Slovo becomes Chief of Staff. So, the period when he's fully focused on Special Ops is actually only in '80 to '83. Then he's putting in his energy together with the Commander Joe Modise, in the overall work of MK. So, it's quite a short period. By then, of course, he's got a very capable Commander under him in Rashid, who he knows can really deliver the goods. So Special Ops is no longer the hundred percent activity of focus of his own MK work. And then by about 1986 Slovo becomes General Secretary of the Party, he's then a bit further removed from MK, and Chris Hani becomes the Chief of Staff.

About the Dolphins Unit of Special Ops, it was very successful with about 34 or so operations. It's said though that this unit was really carrying out routine MK operations not attacking high profile economic and military targets and shouldn't have been included in Special Ops, rather it should have been under MK generally? Do you have any views on that?

Yes. You know they're regarded as part of Special Ops just because of personalities. That's it. You've got Rashid, who's become the preeminent Special Ops person in the context where Slovo's now focusing on other activities. So here you have a Special Ops connection that's a personal connection in which there's a decision not to hand these people over to the Machinery of MK that's dealing with general operations and that would've been the Gebuza Machinery. The decision is made to include them in Special Operations – and you need to ask Rashid why.

And, in his mind, he would think, well, can I trust these guys and they me, not that Rashid distrusts the Commander of the Transvaal Machinery, Gebuza, but you know it's a human thing; here are my contacts; I can easily supply them with the weapons of war; and should I transfer them to another Machinery that has got so many things happening they might not focus sufficiently on these people and a number of others are going to be in the know of that pipeline and these guys could get betrayed? There's just a possibility. So, I'm going to just remain the link because, sure, it's not Special Ops but that's fine.

But, you know, on reflection, which I hadn't thought about until you're egging me on now, do you know that in actual fact the rest of MK all around the

country, these different Machineries, are by the mid '80s catching up with Special Ops. They'd developed their own capacity so that in the Natal Machinery they found and recruited the most active unit in Robert McBride and Gordon Webster, they were highly capable.

And we could trawl around the country and find other units that are really delivering the goods. They're attacking enemy personnel.

The bombings in Durban under Thami Zulu's command. Gordon Webster's unit where he had knocked out a power transformer station in which a Colonel of the Special Branch gets eliminated. And then the freeing of Gordon Webster from hospital by Robert McBride, that for me is like one of the absolute top actions of that period.

The Webster-McBride unit, I'm told, was part of Special Ops. In any case would you say it was one of the better units?

Yes, absolutely outstanding.

Would you agree that some of their operations were ordinary routine MK activities, though others would qualify in terms of Special Ops?

Yes.

I think Webster walked into their hands. He came out of the country himself and reached out to MK and got referred to Rashid. I think Webster then recruited McBride. Anyway, what do you make of the Magoo's Bar bombing? To what extent do you think that qualifies to be Special Ops?

Well, it was based on information in terms of which McBride understood that on that particular night the service personnel from the nearby Military Command were using that bar, and that's the kind of target that could be considered, and from his point of view, it fitted into the war that was taking place. I think it was a bit of a border-line issue even if the majority of people on a night like that were going to be off-duty personnel, because this is a public bar and it, therefore, meant that ordinary people could be affected.

And actually, at that stage of South Africa, petty apartheid was out, and it meant that places like this were now becoming mixed. Of the three people, I think one was Indian or Coloured. But anyway, if it was whites only maybe the operation would have fit in a bit better? But it was '88, and it wasn't a good thing for us to place a car bomb in an area where civilians could be cut down.

It happened so there's no way that we then apologised. We can regret. It was in the context of the ANC declaring that we need to take the war into the White areas and you had a few of the Magoo's type bombings, including the one

outside the Ellis Park Rugby Stadium. And you know Lambert Moloi, who was the Operations Chief in MK, had sanctioned that, and that wouldn't have been sanctioned at Headquarters, to put a car bomb near a rugby stadium. I mean, you're just going for ordinary civilians.

And I can recall that during the time of what we called the Wimpy Bar War, I was with Slovo and Chris, as a part of a Party delegation in Cuba and when we went to speak to our students, there were probably a hundred there, the Wimpy Bar bombings came up. I talked to them about what is a People's War and explained that it's not a Wimpy Bar War.

The ANC sent out instructions that these bombings had to stop. There were black people being injured by those bombs in the Wimpy Bars.

And then there was landmine warfare on the borders, which we felt was correct to do because these were patrolled by the army, and white farmers were part of the Commando System, but then labourers were getting blown. So, we immediately stopped that.

What's your view on the Church Street Bombing?

Well, we know that there was an error in the timing mechanism and the signal system, they hadn't taken into account that the signal could be interfered with by other signals in that area. Rashid explains that this prematurely set off the explosive device which is why the two comrades who were carrying out the operation were blown up. Unfortunately, that's what happens in war. I know our top scientist, Ronnie Press, based in England was developing those devices and for somebody with his sophistication somehow, he, unfortunately, hadn't taken into account the signal systems in the city which could interfere with and prematurely set off the device. But they had earlier carried out reconnaissance on the South African Air Force Headquarters and that was certainly a target that would have fitted into the war that we were now waging.

There were casualties and those killed, and I think that the regime covered up the numbers who were actually Air Force personnel and presented them as civilians. And you can also see the reconciliation that took place at the TRC between Rashid and the officer who was blinded who understood what this was about. If something like this happened in the streets at Tel Aviv at the Defence Force, I would have no problem about saying this was a correct target. And actually, what on earth is the regime doing in a war maintaining their key security offices in the centre of a city? They should've long vacated it. They were caught on the wrong foot and didn't expect that this would be a target. So, I would say it really ranks as one of the big blows that MK carried out. And I'll, therefore, defend it.

Hélène has admitted that she brought the car bomb in. She has publicly expressed her reservations about the operation. Klaas also had some reservations, I think.

I don't think it's bad for Hélène and Klaas to say these things now. Why should we hide these things? It actually gives an idea about what happened and why we had no choice but to risk civilians in certain situations in the war then.

You were heading MK's Military Intelligence. You spoke about your interaction personally with comrades like Rashid and earlier Obadi on some Special Ops issues, but did the Military Intelligence structure you headed cooperate with Special Ops in any way on this operation?

No. We were both in the Military Headquarters Command. So, they would have access to all my products. I can't recall a decision whereby we would now provide specific information for a particular project. At that point Rashid had very adequate connections in the field at home. I was assembling a huge amount of information. I think I must have given him information about the various bases. One of the bases was Diepkloof on which I had huge mapping, photos and other information. I'd pass over that stuff and also on the Military Command in Durban and other military bases. The main cooperation, as I said, was on the routes to get into the country.

Do you know what happened with the Durban Mobil Oil Refinery operation? And how those comrades got killed, Clifford Brown and them?

Rashid asked me to give Clifford Brown some briefings. Now you're making me remember. I had a long discussion with Clifford about the various military bases in Durban that could be targeted. I can't recall discussing the refinery though. I had had information about how the refineries were being protected and photographs, which were dangerous to get. But in terms of what kind of weaponry was needed to strike the oil or the gas containers – that we might have discussed. You couldn't fire a rocket through the fence, it would go off on impact with the fence, it wouldn't go through that wiring because it was mesh and it wouldn't hit the actual container.

So, it was a question of checking buildings and heights and where you might get a good line of fire. Because I remember having quite a lot of discussion with Clifford – and then I was terribly upset when I heard what happened in Durban! I'd had a lot of discussion with Rashid about it and he explained what occurred and how the enemy police had got onto him. He explained how they'd retreated to some warehouse and they fought to their death. But I can't recall better than him what went wrong. Maybe after they'd fired at the object, there was a very quick response, which is also what we would've explained from

Military Intelligence's side to expect, and the response times and response units of who you would be up against.

Why were car bombs not used more often in the armed struggle in South Africa, unlike elsewhere?

There were lots in Johannesburg. Roodepoort also. (Hein) Grosskopf's in Johannesburg – that was a very big operation. Siphwe Nyanda pulls off a car bomb operation in the Joburg-Roodepoort area. Some policemen died in Roodepoort. So, there was an identical operation between Special Ops through Grosskopf and Gebuza's unit which showed the gap narrowing between these structures. Grosskopf does a brilliant thing – he loads a car with an automatic drive, and in those days they were not so common.

Was that his idea?

Yes, his. And he aims it for the Drill Hall in Joburg. And he just starts it and it goes without a driver into the barriers there and boom! No one was killed. What a psychological hit that was!

He gets onto a motorbike and then gets to the border after that.

Rocky used to motorbike when I was testing him out with a bomb up in Northern Transvaal.

Did you train Hein Grosskopf in any way?

Although I know the guy, I can't recall this now.



Ronnie Kasrils at a SACP meeting, SACP

You gave Hélène and Klaas some basic training in surveillance and other aspects of underground work. Do you remember taking Hélène to go and see a John le Carré movie in Zimbabwe as part of her training to manage surveillance and counter-surveillance,

among other issues?

The Little Drummer Girl? I can't quite remember. Maybe.

Apart from JS, who stands out for you in Special Ops?

Barney Molokoane was the most brilliant operative in the field. Rashid of course. Obadi – absolutely outstanding guy. And in MK generally, Sphiwe Nyanda and Thami Zulu.

But I didn't know those guys too well.

A bit more about Barney?

Barney Molokoane was an incredibly brave and bright guy with little education. He had the gift of the gab, so when he gave you the operational story, you have it with such expressions! It was his mouth and his hands working as he explained and he described, and he just was phenomenal in that sense.

And Obadi? You refer to him in your *Armed and Dangerous*.

Obadi's a lovely young guy, very bright, highly intelligent, very personable, very engaging guy. You could spend a day with him and not get bored. He liked to joke about life in general and he was full of anecdotes about growing up in South Africa and his interaction with Whites because he was quite unusual. A lot of the guys didn't meet Whites at all. But he was trained in TV work and putting TV in homes and so he would tell you stories about Whites, including about some White woman trying to make it out with him in her house. He would tell you about all these Boers who kind of treated him as though he was some kind of dope-head. They were just very funny stories. 'Hey, boy, do you want a cup of tea?' And they give you tea in a jam mug....

But he was also constantly thinking about how to advance the armed struggle. He was good on theory and practice.

It was, you know, really great fun as well as the seriousness and the dangers and the risks. The people had fun and enjoyed what they were doing so much so that recently I was on Radio 702 with Eusebius McKaiser and we were talking about Fezeka (Kuzwayo) and the Zuma rape trial and so on. He made the point that ANC in exile was hell. And I said no, just hold on, you've got that wrong. And I said actually it was the reverse.

Don't think because here's a young woman who recounts rapes that she, unfortunately, went through that it meant life was all hell. I was talking with Kimmy Msibi who was one of Fezeka's close friends, and I asked her what did Fezeka say about her life in exile, and she said that Fezeka loved it still and it had made her life interesting; and the travel and the interactions with others and the other experiences helped her to grow.

Anyway, coming back to the MK comrades, they were very lively, and Obadi was one of the quintessential personalities of MK.

It's been said that after Obadi died, Slovo thought that Rashid was the obvious successor because of how good he was, but comrades objected because they found his style unacceptable, or maybe because they didn't want an Indian comrade as Commander, and so Slovo had to act as Commander for a while until Rashid was eased in.

Well, I don't think I can add very much. Slovo did take direct charge for a while, and I think eased Rashid in.

Did you jump over the fence with comrades into South Africa?

With some people I did. I did with Damian de Lange and his group to link them up with their pick-up near the border fence inside South Africa.

As I understand it, the Ellis Park bombing was carried out by Special Ops, led then by Comrade Lester Dumakude, who took over from Rashid when he took over at Ordinance. Do you know if it was a Special Ops operation?

No. I thought it was under the direction of general MK.

It's said that Hélène got arrested because she acted outside Special Ops with another unit and became vulnerable because the police were monitoring some of those operatives? She was sent inside to be a sleeper at the time, studying at Wits, but instead of lying low she got involved in helping out another underground operative?

Yes, that's true.

It's said that you also made her vulnerable by asking her to do some work for your Military Intelligence machinery?

Only as far as keeping her eyes open, being observant, and informing me of what she may have seen once we met up again outside the country. Things such as military movements, location of road blocks and military bases. Nothing dangerous.

So, she didn't do any work for MI?

None at all.

She did approach me at one point to assist Ebie (Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, ANC and MK veteran and former Robben Islander) exfiltrate from the country. But that was not work for MI.

I was in Swaziland, she knows how to connect with me and she's arranging for Ebie to be brought out after he'd been home on a mission and was wanting to attend the Kabwe Conference of the ANC in June 1985.

I was quite surprised when she explained to me that she was living in Regent Street, Yeoville, and how long she'd been there, and that Klaas was in Zimbabwe. I had lost touch with them. I didn't know this. With T-man, she draws me into helping to get Ebie out, and that's when I say to her that in my opinion she was under surveillance.

How did you know?

She picked me up and we drove to a place called 'The Forester's Arms' outside Mbabane. We're sitting down for a drink and within five minutes a big burly Boer walks in. There are not many people around. He kind of looks around and he avoids looking at us, just a general look. And with so few people around you are always interested to see what's happening. And this guy looks around as though we're not there and then he goes and sits down.

So, I'm now a little alert and I said to her, have you ever seen this guy? 'No', she says. I said he seems a bit shady. Ten minutes later a black guy comes in, smelling of Special Branch; he's well-built, and no tie; when they do surveillance, they're in roughish kind of clothing, anorak, that kind of thing. Dressed quite unusual for a black guy, and it's not the kind of place that you often see black people in, it was very English and a bit elite. This guy's more rough and ready. He goes to sit down.

And I say do you know that man? She doesn't. I said but I think those two guys are linked. 'No, no, you must come and be inside where you live amongst them, then you'll stop being so paranoid', she says!

We leave after half an hour, we get into her car and I say go as fast as you can. And we're going through forests and I'm checking and there's no one in sight. These forests have got these little lanes off the road, so I said drive into one and in five minutes or less we see a car with those two guys driving flat out – and yet they pretended not to know each other earlier. Then I said, you see, you are under surveillance. And she tries to argue with me. I gave her advice and I said to her you've got to tell Ebie. She had him in some hotel close by on the South African side of the border. I said you have to change your plans.

We didn't have an operation for a crossing at that time and anyway I said next time you've got to make sure you're not followed to the border.

From what I'm able to pick up, several MK operatives, including from Special Ops, were previously criminals before becoming politically active. Of course, under apartheid Africans were so easily criminalised, there was a structural context to this, and maybe people who are prepared to defy laws on crime in a conflict-ridden society are more willing to take part in an armed struggle if they become

politicised? Maybe this was the case in the armed struggles in some South American countries as well? And maybe in parts of the radical movements of African-Americans in the '60s and '70s too? You have any views on this?

Yes. Some guerrillas do come from a criminal background more than you know.

If we put it in an international context, you'll know the film *The Battle for Algiers*. So, a key character there has been a criminal who's recruited into the FLN (National Liberation Front). And in my own experience, the person I worked with very closely, Bruno Mtolo, had been in prison. He was a burglar and a criminal. He hid it from us. We didn't know. But that's why he was so adept at the work, breaking into dynamite storages and so on. So, they have a bit of that ability and they know about smuggling and crossing borders, etc. There is an attraction because if they're from the underclasses they have resentments for the ruling class.

And when they're given political understanding, their minds are opened up and they understand the political context for their anti-social behavior. That's not found so much amongst the leadership of the movement but some of the rank and file.

For example, the two comrades – Freddie Shongwe and Ezekial Maseko – who died in the Pretoria bombing were previously criminals. Johannes Mnisi (MK name, Vincent Molefe) coordinated them.

Yes. The problem with these guys is you can never be sure when they can turn again, so I was always a bit wary because I had the example from our campaign, with Bruno Mtolo.

On another matter: the sense I have based on the interviews so far and some of my research, is that while the South African security police were brutal, they were not as utterly ruthless and certainly not as sophisticated and efficient as Mossad or some of the South American security police in the '60s and '70s? Why would the apartheid security not have assassinated more of the senior ANC leaders? Tambo, Modise, Slovo, and others? Yourself? Surely, they could have easily reached these and other leaders, including you, if they really wanted? And, despite the extensive infiltration, they didn't seem to know what was really happening under their noses at times? Just one example that comes immediately to mind: Hélène said that she was astonished that the police knew nothing about how the car bomb got in for the Pretoria Air Force operation. They didn't know she brought the car in. They didn't even bother to check at the border posts who came in and left within twenty-four hours of the bombing.

She had utter contempt for them, their lack of knowledge and skills. Weren't the apartheid police not as formidable as was generally thought?

Yes. And I think they could have bumped us off. They tried to pull off assassinations of Pallo (Jordan) and me in Britain in the late '80s. And they gave the operative a poisoned umbrella, but he loses his nerve and he throws it in the Thames. It came up through the TRC hearing.

The British could piece together things very well in the fight against the IRA. The IRA was highly sophisticated and the British would work out things to the last little item and trace many of them. And I remember debriefing H  l  ne about the methods the police used and she said they didn't have a theory, a whole picture, they just pulled up little facts from here and there and couldn't quite put things together.

So, the apartheid security forces were nowhere near as sophisticated as was believed? They were not as all-knowing and all-present as many of us thought?

Yes, definitely not.

What explains that?

Well, you've got to go into the whole sociology of Afrikaners and even the kind of war that we were fighting. I think that as much as they were brainwashed and they feared blacks, they never were in a position where they felt their backs were against the wall and they were comfortable. So, I think they were a bit slapdash.

I was told that because of their sense of racial superiority they underestimated black people, they felt that MK was incapable of doing anything significant. That's why at first, they were convinced that foreigners carried out the Sasol and Koeberg and other operations.

Yes. I think that's a really good observation. So, they actually are caught out by their own propaganda. But you know they were vicious. Look with Ahmed Timol (ANC operative killed in detention) and the torture of others, Eugene De Kock, the hit squads.

They were going after us, but I think they lacked courage once they were out of South Africa. In Swaziland and Botswana it was a bit different, there they felt it's their territory, almost like they were Bantustans.