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# Catch a Fire: The Real-Life Patrick Chamusso

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In "Catch a Fire," Derek Luke plays the real-life hero Patrick Chamusso. Here are some basic facts about his life and politics.

Patrick Chamusso was born into a rural Mozambique family in 1950. His father was a migrant laborer who worked over the border in South Africa as a miner, and as such was only allowed home once or twice a year (for Easter and/or Christmas) and was only minimally compensated. From an early age, Patrick knew that he would have to go out and make a living for himself.

As a teenager, Patrick followed his father to South Africa, taking odd jobs in the mines. He then worked as a house painter and street photographer. He was also a talented soccer player, playing for local leagues. By his early twenties, he was doing well enough to buy a car and a camera, unusual for a young black South African at that time.

One day in the 1970s, Patrick was stopped and his car was searched by the police. Patrick's camera was confiscated as being suspicious; there had been acts of ANC sabotage in the area, and Patrick was suspected of spying for the organization. He was arrested and deported to Mozambique.

His camera, and car, was never given back to him.

Patrick got forged papers so he could return to South Africa. He settled in Secunda, a town several hours east of Johannesburg. He got a job at the oil refinery there, which was one of the largest in the world. Well-liked and a hard worker, he advanced quickly at the plant. His soccer-playing prowess also made him popular at the refinery and in the community.

On May 31, 1980, the ANC's military wing (MK) bombed the Secunda plant, along with two other installations. Hitting these targets with no loss of life was a major strategic victory for the ANC; a propaganda coup, it demonstrated to whites that the apartheid government could be

demoralized and to blacks that the ANC was capable of effectively fighting back.

Patrick was arrested as a suspect in June 1980. Though he was completely innocent, the police suspected him of having helped the ANC gain access to the plant. South African police at that time had the power to hold people suspected of political crimes indefinitely, without access to a lawyer or family. Patrick's torture was so harsh that when he was released, he was a changed man. After having avoided political involvement for all of his life, he now decided that he had suffered needless trauma for a reason, and so he had to do something.

Leaving his family behind, he crossed the border illegally into Mozambique and traveled to the capital, Maputo, where the ANC had its regional headquarters. There, he was initially held in a detention camp while the ANC checked out his story and made sure that he was not a South African police mole. Patrick was accepted into the organization; he trained with and met MK commander Joe Slovo, one of the few senior white members of the ANC. Joe was running Special Ops, a military unit set up to engineer spectacular acts of armed propaganda without casualties within South Africa. He had been responsible for planning the first refinery attacks, and wanted to strategize a bigger strike.

Patrick lobbied to Joe that with his inside knowledge of the Secunda refinery, he could bring the plant to a standstill and make it burn for days. Joe approved the operation, and the ANC agreed to send him back to South Africa for what would be by Patrick's choice a one-man assault. He first completed further training in Angola and then returned to Maputo before traveling, under an assumed identity, by car via Swaziland back to South Africa and then into Secunda.

On the day of the operation, October 21, 1981, Patrick attached land mines to his body and hid himself on a conveyor belt. The belt carried coal from a neighboring mine to inside the refinery, and now would successfully transport Patrick himself as well. His carefully worked-out plan was to place one mine on a water-pump, followed by another on a reactor inside one of the main plants. The impactful first explosion would act as a warning to the thousands of workers inside the reactor, since ANC policy was that no lives were to be lost in any operations; and would make it that much harder for the authorities to fight the fire. He planned for the reactor land mine to explode 15 minutes after the water-pump one.

Patrick left the plant as the first mine went off. The main plant emptied as

planned. Police arriving on the scene guessed that there was another land mine, and found and disarmed it before it could explode.

Six days later, on October 27th, after a massive manhunt, Patrick was caught. He was held for nine months without trial, during which time he was brutally tortured.

His trial eventually took place in Pretoria Supreme Court, in August 1982. Patrick was found guilty on three counts of contravening the Terrorism Act (undergoing training in Mozambique and belonging to an illegal organization; committing sabotage; and unlawfully possessing arms and explosives), and was sentenced to 24 years in prison. Patrick served nearly 10 years on Robben Island until he was amnestied and released in late 1991, along with all political prisoners.

Today, Patrick lives in northeast South Africa with his wife Conney, whom he married after his release from prison. Patrick and Conney have three children of their own, and have foster-parented 80 more, all of the latter orphans. Their orphanage is named Two Sisters.