Saboteurs' inferno at Sasol darkened the sky for three days

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Red flames shot hundreds of metres into the air. An eyewitness recounts: "It was like watching a nuclear bomb going off in the movies." The fires burned for the next three days.

A resident of the nearby Zamdela township said: "It was a tremendous explosion which even rocked my bed. Everything in the house was shaking."

The guerrilla unit hid in Soweto for a week before crossing the border into Swaziland.

Victor's group, at Sasol II in Secunda, travelled to the town and spent the night on a farm. After their final reconnaissance they collected materiel from a cache on the evening before the attack. Moise recalls: "At some point that day we stopped talking to one another. It was an unsaid thing. You felt that you were intruding into someone's spiritual well-being. One calmed oneself thinking of the heroes who had died in the struggle."

This attack went precisely according to plan. The guerrillas cut through the fence, leaving one member to secure the entry point. The others went to the refining area where they placed charges on the gasifying unit and on the hydrogen cylinders. Mission accomplished, they drove to the Swaziland border. Aboobaker Ismail "Rashid", the commissar, and Obadi, the commander, awaited the return of the Sasol II unit at the Swaziland/South African border.

At about 2am they arrived. Two scouts crossed the border and met the reception party. They lifted the barbed wire of the fence to allow the car through. The group headed to Manzini, and from there to the Mozambique border.

The unit first heard the news from a South African radio station while en route to Mozambique. Fires were raging at Sasol I, the announcer said, and there had been a similar attack at Sasol II.

Rashid recalls Obadi laughing with joy, saying: "We did it!" A new phase had begun in the struggle against apartheid.

On June 1 1980 – the day after the19th Republic Day anniversary – South Africa woke up to a new reality, which would play itself out within the next decade. The next morning Rashid and Obadi met up with an excited Joe Slovo, who said he had been standing on the balcony of his Maputo flat looking out in an easterly direction to see if he could see the Sasol I explosion.

● The characters:

Oliver Tambo, then ANC president, died in 1993 in South Africa.

Joe Slovo, SACP chairman, former chief of staff of MK and overall commander of Special Operations, later minister of housing, died of cancer in January 1995.

Obadi Khazaramnyanga (Montso Mokgabudi), then commander of Special Operations, was wounded at Matola in 1981, and died later from his injuries.

Barney Molokoane (Richard Molokoane), then commander of the operational unit at Sasol I, was killed in a skirmish with the SADF and SAP on the Swazi border in 1985, after carrying out a fourth attack on Sasol.

Victor Khayiyana died in the same skirmish as Barney Molokoane.

All the other members of the Sasol I unit died either at Matola or in later operations. David Moise of the Sasol II unit was later tried and sentenced to death for his role in the operation. The death sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. He was released in 1990 during the negotiations.

Rashid (Aboobaker Ismail), former MK Special Operations commissar, later SANDF major-general, has now been appointed chief director of defence policy.

"Jackie" was injured in a skirmish with the Swazi defence force in 1982, and is now back in South Africa.

Faku Senzangakhona is now a colonel in the SANDF.

Richard Molokoane: killed in skirmish

Montso Mokgabudi: died of his wounds

Aboobaker Ismail (Rashid): now directs South African defence policy

At last, the untold story of the armed struggle against apartheid

BY ESTHER WAUGH

Today *The Sunday Independent* publishes the first part of a series on the untold history of the armed struggle against apartheid.

The era of armed struggle dawned on December 16 1961 when Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) soldiers carried out their first acts of sabotage after decades of militant, but peaceful, resistance by the ANC.

Although the ANC leadership continued arguing for peaceful resistance after the Sharpeville massacre, a growing number of supporters wanted to use force against the government.

A group of ANC and SACP leaders decided in June 1961 to include armed action in the fight against racial oppression, and by December the first acts had been carried out.

MK's manifesto, distributed on December 16 1961, said: "Umkhonto weSizwe will carry on the struggle for freedom and democracy by new methods, which are necessary to complement the actions of the established national liberation organisations.

"The people's patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight."

During the 1963 Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela, one of MK's founders, told the court: "I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation and oppression of my people by the whites."

Thousands followed the first MK recruits, especially after the 1976 Soweto uprising – starting a new phase in the armed struggle.

As they were leaving their families behind, pouring over the borders, MK headquarters was reorganised and operated from Angola.

In 1979 a mandate was given to Oliver Tambo by the ANC's national executive council to establish a special task force under his direct command to carry out major operations inside the country. The ANC's dilemma at the time was that to be successful militarily, it had to establish a political base inside the country.

These two aspects of the struggle were in continuous tension. The movement could not expand inside the country without achieving military victories which would draw the people into political action.

The first task selected by Special Operations was to strike at oil refineries, and thereby at a weakness in the country's economic infrastructure, and achieve "armed propaganda".

● *The Sunday Independent*'s series, concentrating on the armed struggle between 1979 and 1984, will attempt to tell the dramatic stories of selected MK actions through the eyes of those who were there.